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THE DRAMATIC WORKS OF
ST. JOHN HANKIN



*Facsimile of a page of the Manuscript
"The Charity that Began at Home."*

THE DRAMATIC WORKS OF ST. JOHN HANKIN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JOHN DRINKWATER

VOLUME
TWO



LONDON
M A R T I N S E C K E R
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THE CHARITY THAT BEGAN AT HOME

A COMEDY FOR PHILANTHROPISTS

“The souls of the just are in the hands of God”

CHARACTERS

LADY DENISON.

MARGERY, her daughter.

MRS. EVERSLIGH, *Lady Denison's sister-in-law.*

MRS. HORROCKS.

MISS TRIGGS.

GENERAL BONSOR.

MR. FIRKET.

HUGH VERREKER.

BASIL HYLTON.

SOAMES, *Lady Denison's butler.*

WILLIAM, *Lady Denison's footman.*

ANSON, *Lady Denison's maid.*

The action of the play passes at Priors Ashton, Lady Denison's house in the country, Acts I, II, and III in the Drawing-room, Act IV in the Dining-room. A week passes between Acts I and II, one hour between Acts II and III, and a week between Acts III and IV.

THE CHARITY THAT BEGAN AT HOME

ACT I

SCENE.—*The drawing-room at Priors Ashton, LADY DENISON's house in the country; a handsome room in the Adam style. On the right are double doors leading from the hall. Similar doors on the left lead to LADY DENISON's own sitting-room. At the back of the stage are French windows, one on each side of the fireplace. These give on to a terrace, of which the low brick boundary wall, ornamented at intervals by stone balls on squat brick piers, is seen through the windows. Beyond the terrace the garden stretches away into the distance. Beyond that the open country, bathed in the sunshine of a hot September afternoon. The French window on the left of the fireplace is closed, but that on the right stands wide open.*

When the curtain rises the stage is empty. Then LADY DENISON is seen to pass the French window on the left, followed by her daughter MARGERY. A moment later they enter by the window on the right. LADY DENISON is a kindly, comfortable lady of about forty-eight. MARGERY is a very pretty girl of twenty-two.

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LADY DENISON. I don't think I'll go out again, Margery. The sun is rather hot, and it tires my eyes. You go if you like.

MARGERY. I'd rather stay with you, mother. The others will get on quite well without me for a little. Where will you sit?

LADY DENISON. Here, I think. [Settling herself into an arm-chair with a sigh of contentment.] I do hope they're enjoying themselves. Do you think they are?

MARGERY [nods]. I think so.

LADY DENISON. That's right. [Looking round vaguely.] I wonder where I put my work?

MARGERY. Here it is. Shall I bring it?

[Brings two wicker work-baskets from side table.

LADY DENISON. Thank you, dear. I knew I'd left it somewhere. I wish this strip was finished. I'm getting so tired of it.

[Gets out long strip of woollen crochet of a brilliant red hue.]

MARGERY. Poor mother! It'll soon be done now.

LADY DENISON [beginning to crochet]. How are yours getting on?

MARGERY [who has begun on a blue strip of equal brilliancy]. Nearly finished. This is my last.

LADY DENISON [sighs]. I've still two more to do.

MARGERY. I'll do one of them for you, mother.

LADY DENISON. No, dear. I shall manage. But next time I shall give blankets.

MARGERY. But that wouldn't be the same as making something, would it?

LADY DENISON. That's why I should prefer it.

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MARGERY. Lazy !

LADY DENISON. I'm so glad Mr. Hylton is coming down. He'll help us to entertain all these people.

MARGERY. Yes. Isn't it lucky he and Miss Triggs and Aunt Emily could all come by the same train ! The carriage will only have to go to the station once.

LADY DENISON. I do hope Miss Triggs will like being here.

MARGERY [*cheerfully*]. I think she will. Poor thing, her lodgings looked dreadfully poor and uncomfortable when I went to see her. Here at least she'll have proper meals and feel she's among friends.

LADY DENISON. Where have you put her ?

MARGERY. In the little room next mine. It's rather small, but the house is so full just now. I wanted to put her next Aunt Emily. But Aunt Emily always insists on having that room for her maid.

LADY DENISON. How long do you think she'll stay ?

MARGERY. Two or three weeks, I hope. Long enough to give her a thorough rest and change.

[*Further conversation is interrupted by the entrance of WILLIAM, the footman. His face wears an expression of portentous gravity.*]

WILLIAM. Can I speak to you, my lady ?

LADY DENISON. Certainly. What is it, William ?
[*Puts down crochet.*]

WILLIAM [*hesitating*]. If you please, my lady . . . I should like to give notice.

MARGERY [*astonished*]. Give notice, William ?

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WILLIAM. Yes, miss.

LADY DENISON. Why now, William?

WILLIAM. I'm very sorry, my lady, to have to give notice at all . . . after being with your ladyship so many years——

LADY DENISON. Yes, yes. But why give notice now? The proper time to give notice is surely ten o'clock in the morning, when I am seeing the housekeeper?

WILLIAM. Very good, my lady.

[Turns to leave the room.]

MARGERY. Stop, William.

[WILLIAM stops and faces round.]

Why do you *want* to give notice? You've always been a good servant. Have you found another situation?

WILLIAM. No, miss. And I don't *want* to give notice. I hope you won't think that, miss.

LADY DENISON [plaintively]. Then why *do* it, William?

WILLIAM [hesitating]. Well, my lady . . . It's on account of Soames. [Hesitates again.]

MARGERY. Soames?

WILLIAM. Yes, miss. As long as Wilkins was here things were better. Not but what we had our quarrels in the servants' hall even then. On account of *Thomas*, you remember, miss?

MARGERY. I remember.

WILLIAM. But with Soames it's different, miss. Soames and I——

LADY DENISON [interrupting]. Have you spoken to the housekeeper?

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WILLIAM. Yes, my lady. But Mrs. Meredith says *she* can do nothing. Soames is that violent and his language quite awful when spoken to. So she said I had better come to you, my lady.

LADY DENISON [*plaintive again*]. How very annoying of Mrs. Meredith.

MARGERY [*rather shocked*]. Has Soames been using bad language to *you*, William?

WILLIAM. Yes, miss. Not that I mind *that*. But there's other things . . . and in fact him and me don't hit it off. So perhaps I'd better leave at the month, my lady.

MARGERY. Nonsense, William. Why, you've been with us ever since you were a boy.

WILLIAM. Yes, miss. And never thought to leave her ladyship so long as *she* was satisfied.

MARGERY. Very well. Mother is perfectly satisfied, and you must stay. And you must try and be patient with Soames. He *has* rather a bad temper with other servants, I know, but I'm sure he tries to conquer it. And *you* must help him. Will you?

WILLIAM [*doubtfully*]. Very well, miss.

MARGERY [*brightly*]. That's right. And then you'll see things will go better. Things always go better if only one tries to *help* people, don't they?

WILLIAM [*still more doubtfully*]. Yes, miss.

LADY DENISON. And I'll speak to Soames tomorrow morning.

WILLIAM. Thank you, my lady. Thank you, miss. [Turns to go again.]

LADY DENISON. And will you please send Anson to me, William?

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WILLIAM. Yes, my lady.

[WILLIAM goes out. LADY DENISON resumes her crochet with a sigh.]

LADY DENISON. How troublesome servants are ! I did think after *Thomas* went we should have no more quarrelling. And now it's Soames.

MARGERY. Well, of course, we didn't engage Thomas because he was a *good* servant, did we ? And it's the same with Soames.

LADY DENISON. I suppose so. But it certainly makes helping people more difficult if they won't exercise a little self-control.

MARGERY [with unanswerable logic]. If they had more self-control they wouldn't *need* help, would they, mother dear ?

LADY DENISON. I wonder if it would be a good thing to ask Mr. Hylton to speak to Soames ?

MARGERY [enthusiastic]. Oh yes, I'm sure it would. Mr. Hylton has such a wonderful influence with people.

LADY DENISON. Very well. I'll ask him this evening—if I remember.

[Enter ANSON, LADY DENISON's maid. ANSON is a young person of attractive appearance, but just now looks rather ill and rather frightened.]

ANSON. You sent for me, my lady ?

LADY DENISON. Yes, Anson. I want you to look at the mantle I wore this morning. The trimming has come unstitched.

ANSON [relieved]. Is that all, my lady ?

LADY DENISON. Yes. I meant to tell you about

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it before luncheon. I thought I would speak about it now while I remember.

ANSON. Very good, my lady.

[Turns to go. MARGERY stops her.

MARGERY [kindly]. Is anything the matter, Anson? You don't look well.

ANSON. Nothing, thank you, miss.

MARGERY. Would you like to see the doctor? We can easily send for him.

ANSON [alarmed]. Oh no, miss.

MARGERY. You're quite sure?

ANSON. Quite, thank you, miss. I'd much rather not have the doctor. [ANSON goes out.

MARGERY. I'm afraid something must be the matter with Anson. She's looked wretched lately. And she used to be so bright.

LADY DENISON [placidly]. I dare say she's only bilious.

[At this point Mrs. HORROCKS comes in from the terrace, followed by MR. HUGH VERREKER. Mrs. HORROCKS is a thick-set, red-faced, pompous woman of no breeding. VERREKER is a handsome, rather devil-may-care young man of nine and twenty.]

MARGERY [looking round, with a smile]. Are you coming in, Mr. Verreker?

VERREKER. Yes. It's cooler here than on the terrace.

LADY DENISON. Margery, give Mrs. Horrocks a cushion.

[Mrs. HORROCKS sinks massively on to a sofa, where MARGERY proceeds to make her comfortable.]

I hope you've had a pleasant afternoon?

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MRS. HORROCKS. Quite, thank you.

VERREKER [*taking a seat by MARGERY*]. Mrs. Horrocks has had no end of a good time. She's been telling me the entire history of the Horrocks family from its remotest past. It appears the first of the Horrockses was a historian in the reign of Theodoric. His name was Orosius. Orosius . . . Horrocks, you perceive. Transliteration by Grimm's law.

LADY DENISON [*who never recognises sarcasm even when she can see it*]. How very interesting.

VERREKER [*blandly*]. It was !

MARGERY. Have you left General Bonsor in the garden ?

VERREKER. No. He's just coming. He wants his tea. He's enjoyed himself, too, by the way. He's been telling Mr. Firket a story about India for the last two hours. Poor Firket ! And it's going on still.

[Which indeed appears to be the case, for the loud voice of GENERAL BONSOR at this moment comes booming in from the terrace in the midst of one of his interminable stories. He and FIRKET are seen to pass the French window on the left, and then enter by that on the right. GENERAL BONSOR is a lean, liverish Anglo-Indian, of sixty-five or so, with a sparse, grizzled moustache. MR. FIRKET is a pallid, deprecating little man in spectacles, whose neat black clothes look rather pathetically seedy.]

GENERAL BONSOR. So I said to Fennesey—Fennesey was our senior major. Thorough sportsman he was ! Shoot a tiger as soon as look at him ! Got killed afterwards out in the Sunderbunds.

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Tiger ate him. Very sad. However—I said to Fennesey : “ Fennesey, my boy, if you don’t keep that dash’d Khansamah of yours in order,” I said, “ you’ll poison the whole cantonment.” Fennesey laughed at that like anything. You should have seen how he did *laugh* !

[GENERAL BONSOR *laughs immoderately*.]

So when the judge and I and Travers were dining with him a week or two later—[turning sharply on FIRKET, whose attention is clearly wandering]—I told you about Travers, didn’t I ?

MR. FIRKET [pulling himself together with an effort]. Eh ? No, I think not.

GENERAL BONSOR. Ah ! I must. Or you won’t understand the story. Travers was in the Guides. He married—let me see, whom *did* he marry ? I shall remember in a moment.

[Pauses, cudgelling his brain.]

LADY DENISON. Won’t you sit down, Mr. Firket ? You look quite tired.

MR. FIRKET [faintly]. Thank you. [Sinks on to chair as far as possible from the GENERAL. The GENERAL, however, pursues him relentlessly.]

GENERAL BONSOR. Blake — Blake — Blakesley ! That was the name ! She was the daughter of old Tom Blakesley of the Police. But I never knew him. He was on the Bombay side. Travers died afterwards of enteric at Bundelcund, I think, or was it Chittagong ? Yes, it was Chittagong, I remember, because I had a touch of fever there myself a year or two later. Well, to go back to Fennesey —

MARGERY [coming to the rescue]. Can you spare

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Mr. Firket to me for a little, General ? I want him to wind some wool for mother.

GENERAL BONSOR. Eh ? Oh, certainly, certainly.

[*The GENERAL turns away pettishly, much annoyed at being interrupted in his story, which, he is convinced, was reaching its most entralling moment. MR. FIRKET breathes a sigh of relief.*]

MARGERY. Do you mind, Mr. Firket ? You did the last for her so well.

MR. FIRKET. Not at all, Miss Denison. On the contrary !

VERREKER [*to MARGERY, under his breath*]. I call that real tact !

MARGERY. Hush !

[*MR. FIRKET is set to wind red wool, which he does contentedly till tea comes in. The GENERAL moons about sulkily for a minute or two, and then takes a seat on the sofa by MRS. HORROCKS, who makes room for him with marked unwillingness.*]

MRS. HORROCKS [*to LADY DENISON*]. What a lot of work you do, Lady Denison.

LADY DENISON. Yes. This is a crochet counterpane for old Mrs. Buckley. It's very ugly, isn't it ? [*Holds it up disparagingly.*] Margery and I each have to do eight strips. Then we fasten them together, like this. [*Puts red and blue strips side by side, in which position the effect they produce is simply paralysing.*] Mrs. Buckley's eighty-three next week, and almost blind. That's why Margery chose such bright colours. So that she might be able to see them, you know. Aren't they *detestable* ?

MARGERY. There's my last finished. [*Holds up*

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trip in triumph.] Sure you wouldn't like me to do one of yours, mother ?

LADY DENISON. No, thanks, dear. If I stopped doing this I should only have to begin on Mrs. Jackson's stockings. I'll do my share.

MARGERY. All right. Then I can get on with something else. [Gets handkerchief-case out of basket.

VERREKER [remonstrating.] I say, you're not going to begin another thing straight off ?

MARGERY. Not begin. This is half done. It's a handkerchief-case.

VERREKER. Is it for yourself ?

MARGERY. No, it's for Mr. Hylton.

VERREKER. The man who's coming down this afternoon ?

MARGERY. Yes. Those are his initials.

[Shows them.

VERREKER. B. H. ?

MARGERY. Yes ; his name's Basil. It's a pretty name, isn't it ? [Starts working on them.

VERREKER. Why are you working him a handkerchief-case ?

MARGERY. I thought he'd like one.

VERREKER. Well, I'd like a handkerchief-case. Why don't you work one for me ?

MARGERY. Perhaps you don't deserve one.

VERREKER. I don't. But you said this morning when one did things for people one oughtn't to think of what they deserve but what they want.

MARGERY. And you said, "What rot."

VERREKER. Well, I've changed my mind. I think you're quite right. And I want a handkerchief-case. My initials are H. V.

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MARGERY. Isn't that rather a sudden conversion?

VERREKER. It's none the worse for that. Besides, now I come to think of it, I do deserve one. [Dropping his voice.] I played billiards with old Fircket this morning—to please you.

MARGERY [*working steadily*]. To please him.

VERREKER. It didn't. I made a hundred while he made eight. He simply hated it. Old Fircket's a perfect ass at billiards—though he says he can give me thirty per cent. off any kind of billiard-table that's made.

MARGERY. Still, it was nice of you to play with him.

VERREKER. It was. I sha'n't do it again. And I think I ought to have a handkerchief-case for doing it at all.

MARGERY. Very well. You shall have the next.

VERREKER. Not the next. This one.

MARGERY. No, no. This is Mr. Hylton's. It's the first time he's been to stay with us. He works very hard while he's in London, and scarcely ever gives himself a holiday. So I promised if he'd come and spend a fortnight with us this summer I'd work him something. This is it.

GENERAL BONSOR [*looking at his watch testily*]. I thought you had tea at *five*, Lady Denison?

LADY DENISON. So we do, General. Is it *five* yet?

GENERAL BONSOR. Twelve minutes past. Twelve and a half.

LADY DENISON. I'm so sorry. I suppose they're waiting for the others. My sister-in-law, Mrs.

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Eversleigh, comes to-day. And Mr. Hylton. And Miss Triggs. You've met my sister-in-law, I think?

GENERAL BONSOR. Yes. Met her in Madrid when Eversleigh was at the Embassy there. I was at Gibraltar.

LADY DENISON. He's at Vienna now. I wish he wasn't. It's such a long way off. We see simply nothing of them.

GENERAL BONSOR. Not in London this season?

LADY DENISON. No. And my brother can't get away even now. So Emily is coming by herself. I do hope she's not going to be late.

GENERAL BONSOR [*unappeased*]. She *is* late. But everybody's late nowadays. It's the fashion. And a doosid bad fashion, too. When I was at Alleghur in '76—

LADY DENISON. I don't think it's her fault. Perhaps the train—

GENERAL BONSOR. Just so! Her train's late, of course. *That's* the English railway system all over. The trains run anyhow, simply anyhow. Why, when I was at Alleghur—

LADY DENISON [*interrupting him desperately in the hope of staving off a story—which for the moment she successfully does*]. It may not be the train, General. Perhaps one of the horses . . . However, I really don't think we'll wait any longer. Will you ring, Mr. Verreker?

[VERREKER *does so.*]

MR. FIRKET [*persuasively*]. You ought to have a motor, Lady Denison. Much more reliable than

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horses. I can get you twenty per cent. off any pattern you like to choose if you think of it.

LADY DENISON. Thank you very much, Mr. Firket. But I'm old-fashioned. I think I shall stick to horses.

MR. FIRKET. Well, if you *should* change your mind, just apply to me, that's all.

LADY DENISON. I won't forget.

Enter SOAMES.

Bring tea, Soames. We won't wait for Mrs. Eversleigh.

SOAMES. Very good, my lady. [SOAMES goes out.

GENERAL BONSOR [*clears his throat*]. As I was saying, when I was at Alleghur—

MR. FIRKET [*insinuatingly*, to LADY DENISON]. I might make it five-and-twenty per cent. with some makers—

GENERAL BONSOR [*sternly*]. As I was saying . . . as I was saying . . . [A bush falls.] When I was at Alleghur in '76 . . . [Annoyed.] There now, I've forgotten what I *was* going to say! . . . [Consoling them.] But it'll come back to me. . . . Ever at Alleghur, Verreker, when you were in India?

VERREKER. For a few months.

MRS. HORROCKS [*trying to head off the GENERAL*]. What was your regiment, Mr. Verreker?

VERREKER. Beastly place, I thought it.

MRS. HORROCKS [*louder*]. What *was* your regiment, Mr. Verreker?

VERREKER. I beg your pardon, Mrs. Horrocks. The Munsters.

GENERAL BONSOR [*delighted*]. Then you knew

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Toby Nicholson ! He commands the Munsters, doesn't he ?

VERREKER [*hesitates*]. Yes.

GENERAL BONSOR. Why, I know Toby. First-rate chap ! Knew him when he was a subaltern. I must write to the old beggar. Where are the Munsters now ?

VERREKER [*who seems bored with the subject*]. Shorncliffe, I believe.

[*The sun begins to set in a glory of crimson, but is quite unable to stop the GENERAL. Nobody notices it, in fact, until the red glow attracts MARGERY's attention a few minutes later.*]

GENERAL BONSOR. Good ! I'll write to-night, by Jove. I'd like to hear from Toby again. I've not seen him since we were at Poonah together. [Triumphant.] That reminds me of what I was going to tell you ! . . . When I was at Alleghur in '76 we had a train from Goomti that was timed to arrive at Alleghur at 6.38. Just in time to change before dinner, don't you know. Well, that train was *always* late, *always*, by Jove ! So I said to Macpherson . . . he was superintendent of the Alleghur-Goomti line. Good chap Mac. Very good judge of a horse. Died of cholera, I remember, in '81—or was it '82 ? . . . Anyhow, I said to him, “ Mac, my boy, I'll race your dashed little train from the Boondi Bridge to the station ”—that's the last three miles into Alleghur—“ with my pony and trap for a hundred rupees.”

[*During this speech SOAMES and WILLIAM have brought in tea. A certain hostility is just visible*

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between them, but very discreetly shown. They put the tea on the table by LADY DENISON, and go out. MARGERY goes to the table, sits down, and begins to pour out. Her questions about cream and sugar, and LADY DENISON's hospitable offers of tea-cake, sadly interrupt the thread of the GENERAL's story, but he struggles on defiantly.]

MARGERY. Does every one take cream ?

MRS. HORROCKS. Milk for me, please. And *one* lump of sugar.

VERREKER. *Two* lumps for me.

GENERAL BONSOR. . . . Well, old Mac wasn't at all pleased at that. He was awfully proud of his little one-horse line. It was opened in '72, I remember. Pat Ellis was traffic manager. Ellis had been——

MARGERY. Will you give that to Mrs. Horrocks, Mr. Verreker ? And this to mother ?

GENERAL BONSOR. Ellis had been——

LADY DENISON. You'll find some tea-cake under that cover, Mrs. Horrocks.

GENERAL BONSOR. As I was saying——

MRS. HORROCKS. Thank you.

GENERAL BONSOR. As I was saying ! . . . [Glares. Silence falls.] . . . Ellis had been on the Bengal-Nagpore line before he came to Goomti. He was a son of old General Ellis, who was killed in the first Sikh war. He married——

VERREKER [bringing cup]. Your tea, General.

GENERAL BONSOR [irritably]. In a moment. In a moment. . . . He married Nellie Tremayne, daughter of Tremayne of the 63rd. Tremayne had four daughters, I remember——

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LADY DENISON [*loud whisper*]. Will you cut that cake, Mr. Verreker, and see if anybody would like some?

[VERREKER does so, with elaborate precautions as to silence. GENERAL BONSOR meantime goes on steadily with his story in his loud authoritative voice, and enjoys himself thoroughly.]

GENERAL BONSOR. Kitty, the eldest, married Molyneux, who was afterwards commissioner at Ranigunj. One of his sons was gazetted the other day to the Shropshires. Another went into the Navy. Maud, the second girl, married Monty Robertson. He was a gunner. They lived in a little house outside Alleghur just where the road forks. One way leads to Balaghai, the other leads to . . . tut-tut, what's the name of that place the Alleghur road goes to, Verreker?

VERREKER [*who is handing tea-cake*]. I don't know. Alleghur, I suppose.

GENERAL BONSOR [*annoyed*]. No, no! Kupri! That's the name. Kupri! There was one more daughter, but I don't remember what became of her. . . . No, there were only three of them, I recollect. It was Ainslie who had four daughters. The Four Graces we used to call them—because there were four of them.

LADY DENISON [*still whispering*]. Some more tea, Mr. Firket?

[But MR. FIRKET murmurs "No" with infinite precaution, and puts down cup.]

GENERAL BONSOR. . . Ainslie was Superintendent

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of Police, and afterwards went to Central India. But I was going to tell you about that race. Well, I took the trap——

SOAMES [announcing]. Mrs. Eversleigh, Miss Triggs, Mr. Hylton.

[SOAMES, having shown in the new arrivals in the order named, goes out. MRS. EVERSLIGH is a prosperous, well-dressed, rather hard-looking woman of forty-five, MISS TRIGGS a lean, angular lady of thirty-four, with thin lips tightly compressed, clothed in meagre, tight-fitting black garments. HYLTON is a handsome man of forty. A good face, but not in the least solemn or ascetic. Clothes quite human and unclerical.]

LADY DENISON [rising]. Dear Emily, how are you? [Kisses her.] The General's story was so interesting I never heard the carriage. You know General Bonsor, don't you?

[GENERAL BONSOR and MRS. EVERSLIGH shake hands.]

How do you do, Miss Triggs? How do you do, Mr. Hylton? [Shakes hands with them.]

MARGERY. How do you do, Aunt Emily? [Kisses her.] I hope you've not had a tiring journey, Miss Triggs?

[Shakes hands with her and HYLTON, bestowing a smile of welcome on the latter.]

LADY DENISON. I must introduce you all. Mrs. Horrocks, this is my sister-in-law, Mrs. Eversleigh. [Bow.] Miss Triggs, Mr. Hylton: General Bonsor, Mr. Fircket, Mr. Verreker.

[Confused bowing from everybody.]

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MARGERY. And now you'll all have some tea. You must be dying for it. Do you know you're dreadfully late?

GENERAL BONSOR. I was just saying before you came in, Mrs. Eversleigh, the English railways are the most unpunctual in the world.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [frigidly]. Indeed? I believe our train was *before* its time. But one of the horses got a stone in its shoe or something, and Hollings took about half an hour getting it out.

MR. FIRKET [triumphantly]. What did I tell you, Lady Denison. You'd much better have a motor.

[LADY DENISON *shakes her head smilingly.*]

MARGERY. Your tea, Aunt Emily. [Takes it to her.] Cream and sugar, Miss Triggs?

MISS TRIGGS [crisply]. No tea for me, thank you. I never drink tea unless it is *quite* fresh made.

MARGERY [cheerfully]. Then I'll order some fresh for you. Mr. Verreker, will you ring?

MISS TRIGGS. Pray don't trouble. I can do *quite* well without any tea.

MARGERY. It's no trouble.

[VERREKER *rings.*]

Bread-and-butter, Aunt Emily?

[MRS. EVERSLIGH *takes some.*]

LADY DENISON. You look dreadfully overworked, as usual, Mr. Hylton. You must have a complete rest while you're down here. [To Miss Triggs.] Mr. Hylton works a great deal among the poor in London.

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MISS TRIGGS. Indeed ? [To HYLTON, sweetly.] Do you find that does any good ?

HYLTON [smiling]. I hope so. . . .

MISS TRIGGS. What kind of work do you do ?

HYLTON. Oh, preaching and writing and so on.

MISS TRIGGS [interested]. Preaching ? Are you a clergyman ?

MARGERY. Mr. Hylton is the Founder of the Church of Humanity.

MISS TRIGGS [disappointed]. Oh ! Not a *real* clergyman.

[There is a general gasp from every one at this remark, except from Miss TRIGGS herself, who seems quite unconscious of having said anything outrageous. Luckily, before she can commit herself further, SOAMES enters. He carries a teapot on a salver.]

MARGERY. Some fresh tea, Soames.

SOAMES. Yes, miss.

[Puts new teapot in place of old one, which he takes away. He goes out.]

MARGERY [hospitably]. Now you can have your tea, Miss Triggs.

[Gives cup to her and takes MRS. EVERSLIGH'S.]

MRS. HORROCKS. Where is the Church of Humanity, Mr. Hylton ? I don't think I've ever been in it.

HYLTON [quite simply]. The Church of Humanity is everywhere.

MRS. HORROCKS. But the *Church*, the building ?

HYLTON. We have no building so far. I preach in halls and different places about London, which we hire.

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MISS TRIGGS. I don't call that being *everywhere*. I call that being *nowhere*.

HYLTON [*quite good-tempered*]. In one sense, of course.

MARGERY [*more to cover up Miss Triggs' second lapse than from a desire to feed Mrs. Eversleigh*]. Give that to Aunt Emily, Mr. Verreker.

'MRS. EVERSLIGH [*to Verreker, who brings her back her cup*]. Are you one of the Norfolk Verrekers? I met Sir Montague in London two seasons ago.

VERREKER. He's my uncle.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I remember he was very full of some experiments he was making . . . with turnips. To combat agricultural depression, I think.

VERREKER. I dare say. Uncle Montague's always muddling round with that kind of thing.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. It doesn't interest you, apparently.

VERREKER. Not in the least. But it amuses him.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Is he working at it still?

VERREKER [*carelessly*]. Probably. I've not seen him for the last four years.

MARGERY [*noticing the red glow of the setting sun which now fills the room, and turning to look through the window*]. What a lovely sunset! Come, all of you. [*Going on to terrace.*] We must go out and see it. Mrs. Horrocks, General, Aunt Emily. Come.

LADY DENISON. Margery! Emily hasn't finished her tea yet. Nor has Miss Triggs.

MISS TRIGGS [*rising*]. Thank you. I have quite done.

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MARGERY [*who is standing just outside the French window*]. Come to the end of the terrace. You can't see it properly from here. Be quick, or it'll be gone. Come along.

[*All the visitors troop off after MARGERY except MRS. EVERSLIGH. They are seen to pass the window on the left before they disappear. LADY DENISON remains to entertain her sister.*]

LADY DENISON. How did you leave Edward, Emily?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Very well, I think. He's had a lot of work to do lately, and that always seems to suit him. How have you been?

LADY DENISON. Quite well, thanks.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Who are all these dreadful people you've got down here?

LADY DENISON [*protesting*]. Not *dreadful*, Emily.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Aren't they? I can hardly imagine a more dreadful visitor than General Bonsor. He's the greatest bore in London. Edward says he's nearly emptied three of the Service Clubs. I thought people had given up inviting him.

LADY DENISON [*placidly*]. That's why we asked him.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*puzzled*]. I beg your pardon?

LADY DENISON. That's why we asked him. You see, he's getting an old man, and it seemed so unkind that nobody would have him to their houses. Of course, his stories *are* rather long. But I suppose he can't make them any shorter. So Margery thought if we asked him down for ten days he might enjoy it.

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MRS. EVERSLIGH. I think it very unlikely we shall enjoy it. [Rises and puts down cup.]

LADY DENISON. Would you mind ringing while you're up, Emily? Then Soames can take away.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [does so]. Who's that Miss Triggs?

LADY DENISON. She's a governess. She teaches German.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Is she going to teach you?

LADY DENISON [emphatically]. Oh, no, Emily. Margery did suggest it. But I refused. Miss Triggs is only here as a visitor.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I see. [Returns to her seat.]

LADY DENISON. Margery met her at the Hammonds'. She taught Cecily for a few weeks—till they could get some one else. She's very poor, I'm afraid, and doesn't get many pupils. So Margery thought it would be kind to ask her to stay. [Enter SOAMES.] You can take away, Soames. And turn on the lights.

SOAMES. Yes, my lady.

[SOAMES turns on the electric lights and removes the tea things. LADY DENISON resumes her interrupted crochet.]

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Are all your visitors invited on this penitential system?

LADY DENISON. Except you, Emily.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Except me, of course. That Mr. Firker, for instance?

LADY DENISON [correcting her]. Firket. He's something in the City. I'm not sure what. But nothing very prosperous, I'm afraid. He used to be a

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stockbroker, but he failed. And now he sells things on commission. I believe that's what it's called. He's always wanting to sell me a new billiard table or a bicycle or a sewing machine. To-day it was a motor car. I shall have to buy something from him before he leaves, I know.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Where do you pick up these extraordinary people?

LADY DENISON [*quite simply*]. Margery found Mr. Firket. On the Underground Railway.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. *Where?*

LADY DENISON. At South Kensington, I think. But it may have been Sloane Square. It was in a first-class carriage, and Mr. Firket only had a third-class ticket. An inspector came round and wanted to take him up. So Margery paid his fare, and then, of course, they became friends.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Naturally!

LADY DENISON. He's been with us nearly a week. He goes on Monday.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I'm glad to hear it.

LADY DENISON. Mrs. Horrocks we met in a hotel at Mentone. The other people at the hotel would hardly speak to her. They were quite rude about it. Which seemed very unkind, as she is only dull and rather vulgar. And she can't *help* that, can she? So Margery said we must be *nice* to her. And later on, when we were arranging whom to have down, we thought *she* should be asked.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Surely this is rather a new departure of yours, Muriel? You were always perfectly ridiculous about what you call being kind to people. But it never used to be as bad as this.

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LADY DENISON. It's Mr. Hylton's idea. He calls it beginning one's charity at home. He wants every one to do it.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. How curious. He *looks* sane enough.

LADY DENISON. Of course he's sane, Emily. Mr. Hylton is a very clever man. He writes *books*.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. But why does Mr. Hylton think you should fill your houses with wild beasts in this way? Is it for the good of *their* souls or of yours?

LADY DENISON [*quite impervious to her sister's sarcasm*]. Both, I think. It was in a sermon he preached—on the true hospitality and the false. It was a beautiful sermon.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Which is this?

LADY DENISON. The *true*, of course. *False* hospitality is inviting people because you like them. *True* hospitality is inviting them because they'd like to be asked.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Ah! . . . I wish you'd thought of mentioning in your letter that you were practising true hospitality just now. Then I wouldn't have come.

LADY DENISON. Now you're being worldly, Emily. And when people are worldly it always makes me drop my stitches.

[*Does so.*]

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Why was Mr. Verreker asked, by the way? I suppose there's something shady about him as *he's* here?

LADY DENISON. I don't think so. Margery met him at a dance at the Fitz Allens'. His parents are both dead and he's quarrelled with his uncle, and

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altogether seems rather alone in the world. So Margery thought he was *quite* a person to be asked.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Why did he quarrel with his uncle ?

LADY DENISON. About his leaving the army, I think.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Why did he leave the army ?

LADY DENISON. I don't know, Emily, I never asked.

[MRS. EVERSLIGH *shrugs her shoulders impatiently.*]

That's all we've got at present.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. And quite enough, too. I hope they're all properly grateful ?

LADY DENISON [*astonished that her sister should not have grasped this.*]. They don't know. Of course, we shouldn't *dream* of telling them. It would spoil all their pleasure. They think they're asked here because we *like* them. If they didn't they wouldn't enjoy it half so much. People do so love to feel they're *wanted*.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. It must be an unusual sensation with the General ! [The sneer passes unregarded by LADY DENISON, who has dropped another stitch.] How long has Mr. Hylton been preaching in this absurd way ?

LADY DENISON. He has been working among the poor for years, I believe. But it was only this season that people one knew began to go to him.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Does he make converts ?

LADY DENISON. I suppose so. His services were crowded.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Indeed ? I must remember to

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take Edward when we are next in London. Edward always enjoys a new religion.

LADY DENISON. Won't you talk to Mr. Hylton while he's down here?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I shall make a point of doing so. London is changing very much, Muriel. Twenty years ago every one in society went to church—or, at' least, pretended to do so. Nowadays people seem to go anywhere!

[MARGERY returns from her sunset, followed by MRS. HORROCKS and MISS TRIGGS. The glow has faded from the sky and twilight is falling.]

MARGERY. It's been such a lovely sunset, Aunt Emily. You *were* lazy not to come out.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Your mother and I have been talking.

MARGERY. Can Mrs. Horrocks write a letter in your room, mother? The General's in the library with Mr. Fircket, and that's rather disturbing.

LADY DENISON. Certainly. Will you turn on the lights, Margery? You'll find note-paper and things on my table, Mrs. Horrocks.

MRS. HORROCKS [*graciously*]. Thank you so much, Lady Denison.

[MARGERY turns on the switch by the door of LADY DENISON's room on the left. MRS. HORROCKS goes off. MARGERY closes the door after her, and turns to Miss TRIGGS.]

MARGERY. Now I can show you your room, Miss Triggs, if you will come upstairs.

LADY DENISON. I'm afraid we have had to give

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you a *very* small room, Miss Triggs. But the house is so full just now.

MISS TRIGGS [*sweetly*]. Pray don't apologise, Lady Denison. Of course, I know persons who are compelled to support themselves by *teaching* cannot expect to be treated with *ceremony*! *Anything* will do for *me*.

LADY DENISON. I assure you——

MISS TRIGGS. Not at all. I *quite* understand.

LADY DENISON. But really, Miss Triggs——

MISS TRIGGS [*firmly*]. Please do not trouble to say any more. It is quite unnecessary. Shall we go, Miss Denison? [*Stalks out, followed by MARGERY*.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. What an intolerable woman!

LADY DENISON. I do think she might have let me explain.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Explain! I should have packed her out of the house if I'd been in your place.

LADY DENISON. I don't think Mr. Hylton would approve of *that*.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Then Mr. Hylton should do his own entertaining. Why doesn't he have Miss Triggs to stay with *him*?

LADY DENISON. Emily! Mr. Hylton is a bachelor.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I suppose so. People with absurd theories about life usually *are* bachelors. But I don't think Miss Triggs would have come to any harm. She's excessively plain.

LADY DENISON [*shocked*]. Really, Emily, what dreadful things you say. I don't think living in Vienna can be at all good for you.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*ignoring this rebuke*]. What I can't understand is why, if you *must* be kind to

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people—which seems to me quite unnecessary—you shouldn't choose agreeable people instead of disagreeable ones.

LADY DENISON [*worried*]. I'm afraid I can't make it any clearer. But Mr. Hylton will tell you. [*HYLTON is seen to pass the window on the left.*] Here he is. [*He enters by the other window.*] Mr. Hylton, will you kindly explain to Mrs. Eversleigh why I have to be kind to disagreeable people? I never can remember, and Margery isn't here.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*with dangerous sweetness*]. My sister-in-law has been telling me about your peculiar doctrines, Mr. Hylton.

HYLTON [*quite sincere and matter-of-fact*]. You see, Mrs. Eversleigh, agreeable people don't need friends to be kind to them. They have plenty already. Disagreeable people have not.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*briskly*]. If people are disagreeable they don't deserve kindness.

HYLTON [*smiling*]. It's not what people *deserve* but what they *want* that matters, don't you think? In fact, often the less people deserve the more we ought to help them. They need it more.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I'm afraid that's hardly a view you can expect me to take seriously, Mr. Hylton. It's very *modern* and *original*, but it's not *serious*.

HYLTON [*gently*]. I should hardly have called it *modern*. Usen't we to be taught that it was our duty to love our enemies?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Yes. But only on Sundays. And no one ever *dreamed* of doing it. So, of course, that didn't matter. You want Lady Denison to *do* it.

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HYLTON [*more gravely*]. I certainly think the world would be a happier place and a better place if people helped each other because they needed help irrespective of whether they deserved it or not.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. That is certainly a convenient doctrine for your friend Miss Triggs.

HYLTON [*smiling again*]. What has my friend Miss Triggs been about? I never met her till this afternoon, by the way.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Still, it's on *your* principles that she was invited. And her manners are insufferable.

HYLTON. A little brusque perhaps. But I dare say it's only shyness. She has never been here before, has she, Lady Denison?

LADY DENISON. No.

HYLTON. And lots of people are shy in a strange house, aren't they?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Her shyness certainly takes a singularly unpleasant form.

HYLTON [*cheerfully*]. Well, we must just set to work to be kind to her and make her enjoy her visit, and in a week or two she'll be a different woman. It's wonderful how a little kindness and goodwill soften people. Will you try?

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*laughing*]. No, no, Mr. Hylton, I'm not going to join the Church of Humanity, not even to change Miss Triggs. Though I'm sure *any* change would be for the better.

HYLTON [*quite good-tempered*]. We shall convert you yet, you'll see.

[MARGERY returns from looking after Miss TRIGGS.]

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LADY DENISON. Is Miss Triggs better satisfied with her room now, Margery?

MARGERY. Yes, I think so. . . . I've put her into mine.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. What!

MARGERY. That's why I've been so long. I had to empty some of the drawers for her and move the bed.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Really, Margery!

MARGERY [*puzzled*]. What is it, Aunt Emily?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. To turn out of your own bedroom merely to please an ill-tempered German governess! I never heard of such a thing!

MARGERY [*who apparently has not considered the subject till now*]. Poor Miss Triggs. I suppose she has rather a curious temper. But I dare say she can't help it.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Nonsense! She's a thoroughly ill-conditioned person.

MARGERY [*mildly*]. Well, Aunt Emily, there's no use being *angry* with her about it, is there? We must just be nice to her and try and make her stay pleasant, and then I dare say she'll be better.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*sarcastically*]. So Mr. Hylton was good enough to suggest.

MARGERY [*throwing a bright smile to HYLTON*]. Then it's sure to be right. Mr. Hylton always knows how to manage people.

HYLTON [*rising*]. After that handsome compliment I think I'd better go upstairs. I have a letter or two to write before post—if it's not gone, Lady Denison?

LADY DENISON. No. The box isn't cleared till

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a quarter past seven. Where have you put Mr. Hylton, Margery ?

MARGERY. In the Blue Room, mother. If you'll come, Mr. Hylton, I'll show you where it is.

HYLTON. Thank you.

[MARGERY goes out to show HYLTON his room. MRS. EVERSLIGH looks after them thoughtfully for a moment. Then she turns to her sister and speaks.]

MRS. EVERSLIGH [meaningly]. Margery seems to have a great admiration for your Mr. Hylton, Muriel.

LADY DENISON [quite unconscious of what her sister is thinking of]. Yes. She thinks a great deal of him.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Um. . . . Is he staying here long ?

LADY DENISON. For a fortnight, I hope.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Is that wise ?

LADY DENISON. What do you mean, Emily ?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. It would be so tiresome if there were to be any foolish entanglement between him and Margery. Girls are so romantic about clergymen. And Mr. Hylton is a *sort* of clergyman, isn't he ? Couldn't you send Margery away somewhere while he's here ?

LADY DENISON [still not seeing the point]. But I don't want to send Margery away. How am I to entertain Miss Triggs and Mrs. Horrocks without Margery ?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Nonsense, Muriel. Do please understand that Margery's future is of more importance than entertaining Miss Triggs. If Mr. Hylton were in orders it would be different.

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Edward might get some one to give him a living—though livings aren't what they were, of course. He might even become a bishop in time. Or at least a dean. But as he's only some kind of dissenter there's no use thinking of that. And if he were to propose to Margery while he was down here it might give us a great deal of trouble.

LADY DENISON [*surprised*]. But is Mr. Hylton going to propose to Margery? I've heard nothing about it.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. And won't—till it's too late. That kind of man has no proper feeling about these things. And, of course, he hasn't a sixpence.

LADY DENISON. Hasn't he, Emily? I thought he was quite well off.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. *What!*

LADY DENISON [*placidly*]. I thought he had quite a large income. Only he gives it all away. At least, that was what Lady Wrexham told me. His place is close to theirs in Shropshire. But it's let just now.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*on whom a light seems to dawn*]. My dear Muriel, why on earth didn't you say so before?

LADY DENISON. I didn't think you wanted to know about Mr. Hylton's income.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*refusing to believe that her sister's obtuseness is anything but assumed*]. Not want to know? Of course I want to know. It makes *all* the difference. If Mr. Hylton is a rich man and has a place in Shropshire it explains everything.

LADY DENISON [*puzzled*]. Explains what?

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*impatiently*]. Your asking him

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here. And turning your house into a bear garden because he tells you to. Of course, it flatters him. And it does no harm—for once. It's not as if you need know these people afterwards.

LADY DENISON [*shocked*]. Emily!

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*ignoring this interruption*]. I wonder what his income really is? I must find out from Lady Wrexham. It'll be a great thing to have Margery properly settled. I was always afraid you might have some difficulty in finding a really suitable husband for her. She's so very *good*. And men don't like that. It frightens them. Yes, dear, you've done quite right, and I think you've been very clever about it. I didn't know you had it in you!

[LADY DENISON *gazes at her sister in hopeless bewilderment—and the curtain falls.*]

ACT II

SCENE.—LADY DENISON's drawing-room, as in the previous Act. Time, about half-past eleven in the morning. A week has elapsed since the events of the last Act. All LADY DENISON's visitors are still with her save MR. FIRKET, who has returned to his obscure occupation in the City. When the curtain rises, LADY DENISON is discovered immersed in a German grammar, from which she is endeavouring to master the intricacies of the first declension.

LADY DENISON. Der Bruder, Des Bruders, Dem Bruder, Den Bruder, O Bruder. [Looking up from book.] Der Bruder, Des Bruder, Den Bruder. . . . No, that's wrong. [Consults book again.] Der Bruder, Des Bruders, Dem Bruder, Den Bruder, O Bruder ! What a language !

[LADY DENISON reads through the declension once more, with still greater emphasis on the "O," which she seems to find a relief for her feelings. She then puts down her book on her lap, and is about to try if she can repeat it correctly from memory, when she is interrupted by the entrance of her sister from the hall, carrying a half-finished letter. MRS. EVERSLIGH is not in the best of tempers.]

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Here you are, Muriel. I was just going to your room to find you.

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LADY DENISON. Miss Triggs is in there writing letters. [*Murmurs softly.*] Der Bruder, Des Bruders, Dem Bruder—

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Can you find a corner for me, too? When General Bonsor and Mrs. Horrocks are in the library together I feel like Daniel in the den of lions. It's impossible to write letters under those conditions.

LADY DENISON [*plaintively*]. *How* tiresome! I hoped they would get on better after that scene in the drawing-room last night.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I'm sure I don't know why. If you ask impossible people to stay they may be civil to *you*, but they're perfectly certain to quarrel with each other. Mr. Hylton doesn't seem to have thought of that. [Seats herself at writing-table.]

LADY DENISON. What are they quarrelling about now? Was it about the Peerage again?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Yes. Mrs. Horrocks—who really is the most vulgar person I have ever met—was explaining to Mr. Verreker that she could always tell whether a person was well-born or not the moment she set eyes on him. Good blood always told. Of course, this was meant for the General, whose father was a tailor in Regent Street, as everybody knows. The General took up the challenge at once, and growled out that good birth was all rubbish, and good blood came from eating good butcher's meat, not from being fifth cousin to a baronet. The reference was to Sir James Horrocks, who is Mrs. Horrocks's second cousin twice removed, as she's never tired of telling us. At that Mrs. Horrocks flushed crimson, and said

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the General was no gentleman—and then I came away.

LADY DENISON. Didn't Mr. Verreker manage to soothe them?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. He didn't try. He seemed rather to enjoy the carnage.

LADY DENISON [*much depressed*]. I wonder if I ought to go? It'll interrupt my German dreadfully.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Your German?

LADY DENISON. Yes. I've had to learn German after all—to please Miss Triggs. She was getting restless at having nothing to do, and yesterday she said she really must be thinking of getting back to her work. Which was absurd, of course, as no one wants to learn German in September. However, Margery said we ought to find her a pupil, just to keep her amused. So she's to teach me. [Sighs.]

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Why doesn't Margery learn?

LADY DENISON [*peevishly*]. Margery knows German already. Girls seem to know everything nowadays. [Murmurs.] Der Bruder, Des Bruders, Dem Bruder—

[*But LADY DENISON seems fated never to get beyond the dative case of her declension this morning, for at this moment Mrs. HORROCKS bursts into the room. She is purple in the face with indignation.*]

MRS. HORROCKS. Lady Denison! I really must ask you to request General Bonsor to moderate his language. I have never been treated with such disrespect in any house before.

LADY DENISON [*meekly*]. I'm so sorry, Mrs. Horrocks. What has the General been saying?

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MRS. HORROCKS. I couldn't possibly repeat it. But he has entirely forgotten the courtesy that is due to a *lady*, as I told him !

LADY DENISON [*deprecatingly*]. Was that wise ? I should have thought it would only make the General worse.

MRS. HORROCKS. It *did* ! He became so violent that I felt obliged to leave the room at once. General Bonsor ought to understand that this is not a barrack yard.

LADY DENISON [*trying to soothe her*]. You must make allowances, Mrs. Horrocks. The General's temper *is* violent at times, but I don't think he can help it.

MRS. HORROCKS. He *ought* to help it.

LADY DENISON. Still, he's an old man. And he's been in India. And when people have done that we must make allowances for them—on account of the climate. I hear it's so trying. [*Insinuatingly*.] And we all have failings of *some* kind, haven't we ?

MRS. HORROCKS [*stiffly*]. I am not aware that *I* have failings.

LADY DENISON [*accepting the correction with a meekness at which Mrs. EVERSLIGH'S blood boils*]. Well. All the rest of us. Perhaps if you went back to him now you would find him a little cooler.

MRS. HORROCKS. I shall certainly not do anything so rash. If I go out on to the terrace do you think I shall be safe from his intrusion ?

LADY DENISON [*delighted to get rid of her on any terms*]. Perhaps that would be best. You'll find chairs out there. [*Mrs. HORROCKS stalks out on to the terrace.*] LADY DENISON turns to her sister, who

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has been endeavouring to go on with her letter.]
I wonder how the General is now. Do you think
I ought to send Margery to him ?

MRS. EVERSLIGH *[looking up sharply]*. Certainly
not. Leave him to Mr. Verreker.

LADY DENISON *[doubtfully]*. Mr. Verreker isn't
always very successful with the General. He never
seems to take him seriously. And the General hates
that. But Margery can always manage him.
[Rising.] Do you know where she is ?

MRS. EVERSLIGH *[irritably]*. With Mr. Hylton,
let's hope. Do leave her in peace.

LADY DENISON *[sitting down again resignedly]*.
Very well, Emily. . . . Der Bruder, Des Bruders,
Dem Bruder, Den Bruder, O— *[MARGERY and
VERREKER enter from garden.]* Margery, will you
please go to the library and see after the General ?
He's been quarrelling with Mrs. Horrocks.

VERREKER. The General's not in the library now.
We passed him a moment ago crossing the lawn.

MRS. EVERSLIGH *[severely]*. I thought you were
with Mr. Hylton, Margery.

MARGERY *[quite unconscious of the heinousness of
this conduct]*. Mr. Hylton's correcting proofs. I've
been to the kitchen garden—with Mr. Verreker—
to order the vegetables for luncheon.

MRS. EVERSLIGH *[tartly]*. I hardly think Mr.
Verreker can have been of much assistance.

VERREKER *[blandly]*. On the contrary, I was in-
valuable. I prevented Miss Denison from ordering
peas and substituted beans. It's too late for peas.
Besides, I prefer beans. And I insisted on peaches.
The gardener hesitated, but I was firm.

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LADY DENISON [*persuasively*]. *Would you mind being quite quiet all of you for the next ten minutes ? Or I shall never know this declension in time for Miss Triggs. You might go back to the library, Emily, as the General has gone.*

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*rising*]. Well, perhaps I shall be less disturbed there. [*Takes up unfinished letter.*] And you'd better go to the schoolroom and practise, Margery. You'll forget your music altogether if you aren't careful.

MARGERY. Very well, Aunt Emily.

[MRS. EVERSLIGH *returns to the library*. LADY DENISON *returns to her German grammar*. MARGERY and VERREKER *converse in confidential undertones*. *The effort is well meant, but if they talked at the top of their voices it could hardly interfere with her progress more.*]

LADY DENISON [*murmurs*]. Die Schwester, Der Schwester, Der Schwester, Die Schwester, O Schwester. [*Aloud*.] You won't mind my going on with my German, will you, Mr. Verreker ? I really *must* get it done.

VERREKER [*heartily*]. Not a bit. I *like* seeing other people work.

MARGERY [*laughing*]. Then you can stay and watch mother while I go and practise.

VERREKER. I'll come and watch *you*.

MARGERY [*shaking her head*]. Oh no. I never allow any one to be with me when I practise. On account of the wrong notes.

VERREKER. Well, don't practise then. Stay down here and talk.

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MARGERY. And waste half the morning! Certainly not!

VERREKER. You needn't. You can work—at my handkerchief-case. You're taking an awful time over it.

MARGERY. What a shame! Why, I only began it two days ago, and it's half finished.

VERREKER. Is it? Let me see.

MARGERY. [takes it out of basket]. Look!

VERREKER. I say, it is getting on.

MARGERY [looks at it contentedly]. Yes. There are the initials. H. V. Aren't they nice and sprawly?

VERREKER. I say, it's really awfully nice of you to work it for me, Miss Denison.

MARGERY [threading a needle]. But I like working things for people.

VERREKER. Not for everybody, though?

MARGERY. Oh yes, if they want them. I'm making a whole lot of things for the Willises' bazaar at Christmas.

VERREKER [disgusted]. I hope you don't class me with a beastly bazaar?

MARGERY. It'll be a very nice bazaar. It's to pay off the debt on the Parish-room.

[*There is silence for a minute or two. MARGERY works away steadily at the handkerchief-case. VERREKER looks at her wonderingly.*]

VERREKER [genuinely curious]. Miss Denison, don't you ever do anything to please yourself?

MARGERY. Of course I do. Lots of things.

VERREKER. Do you? I wish I could catch you at it.

MARGERY [puzzled]. What do you mean?

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VERREKER. Why, you seem to me to spend your whole time looking after other people. All the morning you run round doing things for your mother.

MARGERY. I'm not "running round" now, am I?

VERREKER. No. Because you're making *me* a handkerchief-case. In the afternoon, if I ask you to come for a walk, you insist on taking Miss Triggs or that ridiculous old General, because it "wouldn't be kind not to ask them." I think that's the phrase? In the evening you play bezique to amuse Mrs. Horrocks. Don't you *occasionally* do something to amuse yourself?

MARGERY [*quite simply*]. I don't know. I've never thought about it.

VERREKER. That's just it! You've never thought about it! Well, I think it's not right. Nobody ought to be as unselfish as all that. It shows up the rest of us too much.

MARGERY [*laughing*]. How absurd you are.

VERREKER. I'm not absurd. Quite the contrary. [Leaning back lazily in his chair as he makes this profession of faith.] I like every one to give his mind to getting a good time for himself in this wicked world. Then I know where I am. Of course, I don't mind his doing some one else a good turn now and then. But he oughtn't to over-do it. You *over-do* it.

MISS TRIGGS [*opening the door on the right and poking her head out of LADY DENISON's room archly*]. I'm ready for you now, Lady Denison.

LADY DENISON. Very well. [Rising *dismally*.] I shall be in my room with Miss Triggs, Margery, if any one wants me.

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MARGERY. All right, mother.

LADY DENISON. Der apfel, Des apfels, Dem apfel, Den apfel, O apfel.

[Repeats this to herself in a last desperate effort to imprint it on her memory as she disappears through the door on the right to join Miss TRIGGS. There is a pause. MARGERY has been thinking over VERREKER's last remark gravely. She now takes him to task with charming seriousness.]

MARGERY. Mr. Verreker, why will you always pretend to be selfish and cynical? I'm sure you're not really.

VERREKER. I don't know about cynical, but I'm unquestionably selfish. I have no illusions whatever about that.

MARGERY. Then why don't you try to improve?

VERREKER. I don't want to improve. I'm quite contented to be as I am.

MARGERY [rather shocked]. Nobody can be that! We all have ideals of some kind.

VERREKER [briskly]. Only for other people. And they're usually great nonsense. If people would only give up bothering about ideals and face facts, what a much happier world this would be for all of us.

MARGERY [earnestly]. But that would be dreadful! Think what the world would lose! Think of all the saints and the martyrs who laid down their lives for ideals!

VERREKER [equally in earnest]. And think what a lot of harm they did!

MARGERY [horrified]. Mr. Verreker, you can't

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mean that ! You must feel sometimes how splendid it would be to do something heroic, to lay down your life for a great cause, to make the world better.

VERREKER [*laughing*]. I don't want to make the world better. I think the world's all right as it is.

MARGERY [*astonished*]. But you can't *always* feel like that ? There must be times when you feel that the world is full of suffering and injustice. That it's not all right, but all wrong.

VERREKER [*refusing to be impressed*]. Oh yes. When I'm not well, you mean ?

MARGERY [*hurt*]. No, I don't. Seriously.

VERREKER [*thinks for a moment*]. Well, sometimes, perhaps—when I'm with *you*, for instance—I have a dim feeling that if we all put our backs into it we might improve things. But I struggle against it.

MARGERY [*wondering*]. Why struggle against it—if you think it would make things better ?

VERREKER. Because people who try to improve the world have rather an uncomfortable time, Miss Denison. And I've a great dislike of being uncomfortable.

MARGERY. Mr. Verreker !

VERREKER. Now you're shocked. But that's inevitable, I suppose. If one only knows enough about people one always does disapprove of them.

[*At this point the conversation is interrupted by the entrance of Hylton. Margery welcomes him with a smile. Verreker, I am afraid, does not.*]

MARGERY. Have you finished your proofs, Mr. Hylton ?

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HYLTON. For this morning.

MARGERY. Then will you come here and bring Mr. Verreker to a better frame of mind? His opinions are simply dreadful—if they are his opinions. You must convert him.

VERREKER [rising]. No. If I'm to be converted—which I sincerely hope will not happen—I stipulate that it shall be by Miss Denison unaided. Two to one isn't fair. I shall go—unless Hylton does.

[*Takes out cigarette-case.*

MARGERY. You're running away!

VERREKER. Yes—to smoke.

[VERREKER strolls out on to the terrace and then out into the garden. There is silence for a moment or two. Then MARGERY speaks thoughtfully, putting down her work and gazing straight before her.]

MARGERY. What a curious man Mr. Verreker is.

HYLTON. Is he?

MARGERY. Yes. He looks at things so strangely. I've never met any one like him before.

HYLTON. In what way?

MARGERY. In what he thinks about life—if he does think it. He says he's selfish and isn't at all ashamed of it. He says ideals do more harm than good. And that he thinks the world would get along much better if only people would leave it alone and not keep trying to improve it. Have you ever met any one who thought like that?

HYLTON [lightly]. Oh yes. It's a phase many men pass through.

MARGERY [eagerly]. But they do pass through it? They don't stay like that, I mean, do they?

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HYLTON. It depends. Some men seem as if they were born blind—like kittens. Soul-blind, I mean. They have no perception at all of the spiritual side of things. Then one day something opens the eyes of their soul, and for the first time they *see*.

MARGERY. What kind of thing?

HYLTON. Who can say? There are many ways in which a man's soul may be awakened. A word may do it sometimes—a line in a poem, a sentence in a book. Or perhaps, some one comes into his life, some one who is kind to him or loves him, and then the eyes of his soul are opened.

MARGERY [*enthusiastic*]. How wonderful!

HYLTON [*gravely*]. Yes. But terrible, too. For perhaps no one comes, or the person who might have helped them is careless or indifferent, and then they may remain blind always.

MARGERY [*earnestly*]. But Mr. Verreker—and people like him—only need some one to come and open their eyes?

HYLTON. Yes. Verreker's quite a good fellow, I expect, underneath. He'll turn out all right if only he falls into good hands.

MARGERY. But if he falls into bad hands?

HYLTON [*sadly*]. Then he may never make anything of his life. But it won't be because there was no good in him. Only because no one came to bring it out.

MARGERY [*thoughtfully*]. I see.

HYLTON [*the optimist in him coming to the surface again*]. It's astonishing what a lot of good there is in every man if only you look deep enough for it. Men seem selfish and heartless and indifferent on

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the surface and all the while there's a soul in every one of them! I could give you hundreds of instances from my work among the very poor, cases of people who seemed hopelessly brutish and degraded doing kind things and generous things that would seem incredible if they were not true.

MARGERY [*kindling at his enthusiasm*]. How splendid! But that was *you*, Mr. Hylton. You've such a wonderful influence with people. *You must make Mr. Verreker see.*

HYLTON [*smiling*]. He didn't seem very anxious to listen to *me*, Miss Denison. You must try what you can do.

[Enter ANSON. *She looks pale, and her eyes are suspiciously red. She draws back nervously on seeing who is in the room.*]

ANSON [*hesitating*]. I beg pardon, miss. I thought I might find her ladyship here.

MARGERY [*looking up, surprised*]. Mother is in her room, Anson. But I think she's busy just now. Can I do anything?

ANSON. No, thank you, miss. I wanted to speak to her ladyship. [Going.

MARGERY. You can see if she's engaged, if you like.

ANSON. Thank you, miss. [Crosses rapidly to the door of LADY DENISON's room and opens it.] Can I speak to you, my lady?

LADY DENISON [*off*]. Yes. Come in, Anson. What is it?

[ANSON disappears into LADY DENISON's room, closing the door after her.]

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MARGERY [*turning to HYLTON with a smile*]. Poor mother. I expect she was delighted to be interrupted. I know I always was when I was learning German.

HYLTON. Is that your mother's maid? She looks as if she were in trouble of some kind. Is anything the matter?

MARGERY. I don't know. She's not looked herself for some time. I asked her about it a week ago. I wanted her to see the doctor. But she wouldn't.

HYLTON. Has she been with you long?

MARGERY. Four years. I dare say it's nothing serious. Servants are so silly about what they eat. And then they wonder why they aren't well. Or she may have had some quarrel with one of the other servants. Do you find *your* servants quarrel among themselves, Mr. Hylton?

HYLTON. No. You see I only keep one.

MARGERY. I sometimes wish *we* did! Only last week William actually gave mother notice just because he couldn't get on with one of the others. But mother told you about that, didn't she?

HYLTON. No.

MARGERY. She meant to. I suppose she forgot.

[*Re-enter ANSON, crying bitterly, followed by LADY DENISON, much flustered.*]

LADY DENISON. There! There! Anson. Do try and control yourself. There's no use going on like that. Margery, will you go and find Aunt Emily for me? She's in the library, I think. I want her advice about something. And don't come back, dear, for a little.

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MARGERY. Very well, mother.

[MARGERY goes to find MRS. EVERSLIGH, after a puzzled glance at her mother and ANSON.]

HYLTON [rising]. Perhaps I'd better? . . .

LADY DENISON [fussily]. No, no! Please stay, Mr. Hylton. I shall want *your* advice, too.

HYLTON. Of course, if I can be of any use . . .

[Reseats himself. LADY DENISON sits also. A silence, broken only by the snufflings of poor ANSON.]

LADY DENISON [half irritable, half plaintive]. You'd better sit down, Anson. And would you *please* not snuffle like that if you can possibly help it. It *can't* do any good, and the sound is most distressing.

ANSON. Very well, my lady.

[Tries unsuccessfully to subdue her sobs.]

LADY DENISON [her nerves all on edge]. I do wish Emily would come. Surely Margery ought to have found her by this time. [MRS. EVERSLIGH enters.] Ah! here she is. [Breaking out.] Emily, a dreadful thing has happened! I thought you would advise me.

[Hesitates.]

MRS. EVERSLIGH [testily]. Well, Muriel. What is it?

LADY DENISON [with a miserable effort to pull herself together]. Anson, my maid. [Wanders off again.] You remember Anson? She came to me from Lady Carberry.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Yes, yes. I know. Well?

LADY DENISON [shying frantically at the subject, and taking refuge in irrelevant detail]. I was in my

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room, doing my German. Fortunately Miss Triggs had gone out into the garden for a few minutes while I was trying to learn the second declension. Then Anson came in. She was evidently upset about something, and looked ready to cry. In fact, she *did* cry. She's been crying ever since. [Fresh tears from ANSON.] Oh, *please* Anson, don't begin again. Or if you do, make as little noise as you can.

ANSON [*sniffing dismally*]. Yes, my lady.

LADY DENISON [*still struggling desperately to postpone the moment when she must come to the point*]. I asked her what was the matter, and she said she wanted to give notice. I was very much astonished, because Anson has been with me four years and has never given me notice before. So I asked her why. And then she said that she and Soames . . . well, in fact, that Soames had—

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*interrupting*]. Muriel! If you are about to say what I suppose you are about to say, wouldn't it be better if Mr. Hylton—?

[HYLTON rises again.]

LADY DENISON [*almost weeping*]. No, Emily. I asked Mr. Hylton particularly to remain. I shall want his advice about this. I shall want everybody's advice. Besides, it's partly his fault. For if it weren't for Mr. Hylton I should never have engaged Soames.

HYLTON [*surprised*]. I didn't know—

LADY DENISON. Oh yes. Soames had a *very* bad character from his last place. In fact, no character at all—which is worse. He was with the Matthisons before he came to me, and Lady Frances gave the

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most dreadful accounts of him when Margery was staying with her. She said the champagne had disappeared in the most remarkable manner. And as for his *book*, no one could make head or tail of it. I'm not sure there wasn't something about the plate, too. Anyhow, she sent him away—without a character, as I said. And I always think that so hard for a servant. Don't you, Emily?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. To have no character. Very.

LADY DENISON. Well, of course, he couldn't get another place. And Lady Frances got a letter from him while Margery was there, saying he was almost destitute. So Margery thought he ought to be given another chance. Mr. Hylton is always saying people ought to be given another chance. Aren't you, Mr. Hylton? And as Lady Frances didn't seem willing to have him back and Wilkins was leaving me just then—on account of Thomas—I engaged him. I wish I hadn't now.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. And now Soames has—?

LADY DENISON. Yes. [Lamentably.] And I think it's most wicked of him. Anson has always been a good girl, and her mother is a most respectable woman. However, she is willing to forgive Anson and have her home, I'm glad to say, so that will be all right. [Endeavouring to look on the bright side of things.] She has no father, fortunately. [Fresh sobs from ANSON.] Oh, Anson, not again!

MRS. EVERSLIGH [impatiently]. Hadn't you better send Anson to her room while we decide what is to be done? There's no use keeping her here if she can't control herself.

LADY DENISON [meekly]. I thought perhaps you

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might want to ask her something about all this, Emily? Or Mr. Hylton?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. There's nothing to ask. She's told you her story. Now we must send for Soames and hear what *he* has to say. I suppose we must let him give us *his* version before you dismiss him.

LADY DENISON [*much depressed at the prospect*]. I suppose so. But it's all very painful. Ring the bell, please, Anson, and then go away and cry somewhere else.

ANSON. Yes, my lady.

[ANSON *rings the bell and then goes out, snuffling to the last. Pause.*]

HYLTON [*breaking silence*]. I'm extremely sorry, Lady Denison, if anything I have said has caused all this trouble, either to you or that poor girl. I never dreamed such a thing could occur.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*with bitter politeness*]. Really? Then you must be singularly lacking in imagination, Mr. Hylton. It seems to me the logical outcome of your theories—when applied to domestic service.

HYLTON [*meekly*]. Of course, there's a danger. But all reforms have an element of danger in them.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*triumphantly*]. Then why reform?

HYLTON. But without reform all progress would be impossible. The world would simply stagnate. We *must* risk *something*.

LADY DENISON [*dolorously*]. Well, I'd so much rather not have risked Anson. She was such an excellent maid.

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[Enter SOAMES. For a full minute no one speaks. He looks inquiringly from one to the other, but his demeanour is perfectly respectful. Finally, as the silence is growing oppressive, he breaks it.]

SOAMES. Did you ring, my lady?

LADY DENISON [flustered]. Yes. . . . What is this, Soames, that Anson tells me about you?

SOAMES [not a muscle of his face moves]. What has she told you, my lady?

LADY DENISON. That while we were in London three months ago, within a month of your coming to me, in fact, you . . . And now she's expecting a baby in the spring!

SOAMES [bows]. That is so, my lady.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [exasperated at the unruffled composure of the man]. Well! Have you nothing else to say?

SOAMES [after a moment, during which he seems to be considering the point]. No, madam—except, of course, that I'm very sorry this should have occurred.

LADY DENISON [indignantly]. Is that all?

SOAMES [after another moment's thought]. I think that is all, my lady.

LADY DENISON. Of course, you're prepared to make all the amends in your power to poor Anson?

SOAMES [bows]. Of course, my lady.

LADY DENISON. Very well, then. You must marry her.

SOAMES [respectfully]. I'm afraid I can't do that, my lady.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. There, Mr. Hylton!

LADY DENISON [indignant again]. Nonsense.

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Soames. You will be acting very wickedly if you do anything else. Anson is a good girl. A very good girl. She is the best maid I ever had, and I'm very sorry to part with her. But you have brought this disgrace on her, poor thing, and you must certainly marry her.

SOAMES [*still perfectly respectful*]. I beg pardon, my lady. I should be perfectly willing to marry Anson. She seems a very respectable young woman, as you say. Unfortunately, I am already married.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*scandalised*]. What!

SOAMES [*turning to her*]. I have a wife already, madam—I am sorry to say.

LADY DENISON [*helplessly*]. Really, this is most unlucky. Mr. Hylton, can you suggest anything?

HYLTON. As things stand, I'm afraid there's nothing to suggest. We must do our best for this poor girl, of course [*more sternly*] and Soames must help us in any way he can. That's all that I can think of.

SOAMES [*snubbing his interference with the most crushing politeness*]. Anything *Lady Denison* thinks right, sir, I shall be happy to fall in with.

LADY DENISON [*weakly*]. Very well. That will do then, Soames.

SOAMES. Thank you, my lady.

[SOAMES bows and goes out, preserving his dignity to the last. Everybody seems to breathe more freely when his imposing presence is withdrawn.]

LADY DENISON [*mournfully*]. Poor Anson. I am really dreadfully sorry about her. It's such a terrible thing to happen to a girl.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. If any other of your converts

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are engaging their servants on philanthropic lines. Mr. Hylton, you had better caution them to choose single men.

LADY DENISON [*cheered at this reflection*]. James, I'm glad to say, *is* unmarried.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. James?

LADY DENISON. The boy who helps in the garden. But, then, he's only sixteen.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Tck! . . . [*Pause.*] Of course Soames must be sent away.

LADY DENISON [*sighs*]. I suppose so.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Even Mr. Hylton must see that.

HYLTON [*thoughtfully*]. I'm not sure.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Not sure! After this disgraceful affair!

HYLTON. I am thinking of the future, Mrs. Eversleigh, not of the past. I'm very sorry for what has happened to poor Anson, sorrier than I can say. But that can't be altered now. What is past is past. The question is how are we to help Soames?

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*exasperated*]. But we don't want to help Soames. Soames has behaved abominably.

HYLTON [*quietly*]. That's no reason for not helping him, is it?

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*gasps*]. It certainly seems so to me.

HYLTON. Surely not? Surely it's always our business to help any one if we can, whatever he may have done. And in this case we *can* help Soames. If he's sent away now he may be absolutely ruined.

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You see, it's the second place he's had to leave without a character.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [acidly]. Do I understand you to consider that in his favour, Mr. Hylton ?

HYLTON [mildly]. No. But it gives him an added claim on our forbearance, doesn't it ? Since it makes it more difficult for him to make a fresh start.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [with relentless logic]. Then the more a servant disgraces himself the more we are bound to help him ? And if he only does it often enough I suppose you'd pension him ?

HYLTON [gravely]. I would still try to help him, whatever he had done.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Rubbish !

LADY DENISON. Hush, Emily !

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I beg your pardon, Mr. Hylton, but really this is quite preposterous. It's trying to regulate one's life by a theory instead of by the light of common sense.

LADY DENISON [worried]. It certainly is rather confusing, you must admit, Mr. Hylton.

HYLTON [gently]. I think my view is defensible even from the common-sense standpoint—though it's not a standpoint I set much store by. What I want—what we all want, don't we ?—is to prevent Soames from sinking into destitution and so perhaps into crime.

LADY DENISON. I don't want him to do *that*, of course.

HYLTON. The only way to prevent it is to get him some employment. Unhappily, he is probably unfitted for anything but domestic service. The only thing to do, therefore, is to find him a place,

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and give him a chance of retrieving his character. I would willingly engage him myself if I could, but my establishment has no place for a highly trained butler—or, indeed, for a man-servant at all. But if Lady Denison would keep him on—

LADY DENISON [*protesting*]. Oh no, I couldn't do that.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I should think not, indeed !

HYLTON [*earnestly*]. It needn't be for long. Say a year. If at the end of that time his work and his conduct generally have been satisfactory, Lady Denison can then send him away with a character, and he'll be able to get another place.

LADY DENISON. But I shan't want to send him away if his conduct is satisfactory.

HYLTON [*persuasively*]. Then why not try the experiment ? Of course, I'm now putting this on the lowest grounds, the common-sense grounds. Morally it needs no defence. One should always forgive wrongdoing, shouldn't one ?

LADY DENISON. I can't think *that*, Mr. Hylton ! Wicked people *must* be punished. If they weren't it would be so discouraging for good people.

HYLTON. Wicked people are only weak people, Lady Denison. If they were strong they would resist temptation. But they are weak, and they yield to it.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*with decision*]. If Soames is unable to resist temptation of *this* kind, I think Muriel had certainly better discharge him, on account of the other maids.

HYLTON. I don't think he'll offend in this way again. He's had a lesson.

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MRS. EVERSLIGH. He had a lesson at the Matthisons'.

HYLTON. And profited by it. He has been quite honest since he came to you, hasn't he, Lady Denison?

LADY DENISON. I believe so.

HYLTON [*triumphantly*]. Very well, then. The experiment answered in that case.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*coming back resolutely to her old point*]. Oh, come, Mr. Hylton, we must be *practical*. Of course, this idea about being kind to unpleasant people and worthless people, and, in fact, to everybody one doesn't like and oughtn't to like, *sounds* very nice. But it's not *practical*.

HYLTON [*giving Mrs. EVERSLIGH up in despair*]. Well, Lady Denison, it's for you to decide.

LADY DENISON [*piteously*]. That's just it. I do so hate deciding things. If only I could ask Margery.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Certainly not.

HYLTON [*earnestly*]. It may save a soul.

LADY DENISON. Do you really think that? [HYLTON *nods*.] How very annoying! However, if that's so, I suppose he must stay. [Sighs.]

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Muriel!

LADY DENISON [*goaded*]. Well, Emily, what *can* I do? If Mr. Hylton thinks so.

HYLTON [*with splendid optimism*]. I do think so. Thank you so much, Lady Denison. I'm sure you'll never regret it.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I'm quite sure she will. And I think it's very wrong of you, Mr. Hylton, to make my sister-in-law behave in this way. She doesn't like it.

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HYLTON. You exaggerate my influence, Mrs. Eversleigh. It is Lady Denison's own goodness of heart that makes her want to help people. Without that I should be powerless.

LADY DENISON [*breaking into a smile of content. If you stroke LADY DENISON she purrs at once*]. How nice of you to say that, Mr. Hylton! But you always say the right thing. I was really feeling dreadfully dispirited about all this, and you've driven it all away. There's nothing like *tact*, is there? [*GENERAL BONSOR wanders in from the garden humming a tune.*] Is that you, General? Have you been in the garden with Mrs. Horrocks?

GENERAL BONSOR [*with icy dignity*]. I have *not*, Lady Denison.

LADY DENISON [*flurried*]. Oh no, to be sure, I forgot. . . . I mean, I remember. . . . Just so.

GENERAL BONSOR [*severely*]. I have been in the rose-garden smoking a cigar.

LADY DENISON [*nervously*]. That's so kind of you. It's so good for the roses.

GENERAL BONSOR [*refusing to be propitiated*]. Where Mrs. Horrocks is I have no idea.

[*Opens the door and stalks out, head in air.*]

LADY DENISON [*much concerned*]. Dear me, why did I say that! Of course, I oughtn't even to have mentioned Mrs. Horrocks. But I'd forgotten all about their quarrel this morning. This affair of Soames quite put it out of my head. And now I suppose the General will be offended. Really, what with quarrels among one's visitors and scandal in the servants' hall, life is hardly worth living.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*blandly*]. Mr. Hylton's system!

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HYLTON [rising]. Shall I go and pacify the General?

LADY DENISON [clutching at a straw]. If you would, Mr. Hylton. It really is scarcely safe to leave him alone just now, in case Mrs. Horrocks should come in. [HYLTON nods, and goes out to soothe the GENERAL. LADY DENISON sighs.] It's been a very tiring morning, hasn't it, Emily?

[MISS TRIGGS puts her head in from LADY DENISON's room. She speaks with deadly politeness, the politeness of the boa-constrictor to the rabbit.]

MISS TRIGGS. I've been waiting for you nearly twenty minutes, Lady Denison. Is that declension ready now?

LADY DENISON [flurried again]. Oh, dear, I'm afraid not. I've really had no time to attend to it since you left me, Miss Triggs.

MISS TRIGGS [coming into the room, apparently unable to believe her ears]. No time?

LADY DENISON [volubly]. No. I'm so sorry. I was called away on urgent business. Most urgent business. And it's no good trying to do anything before luncheon now, is it? It will be ready in two or three minutes. [An awful pause.]

MISS TRIGGS [words softer than butter, yet very swords]. I am afraid it is useless for me to attempt to teach you German, Lady Denison, if you are unwilling to give even the small amount of time I ask to studying it.

LADY DENISON [meekly]. But really, Miss Triggs—

MISS TRIGGS. Apologies are unnecessary. I am

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accustomed to be treated in this way. It is the experience of all women, I believe, who earn their living by education. [Turns towards door on the right.]

LADY DENISON. I assure you—

MISS TRIGGS. You need not. I *quite* understand. We will abandon our lesson until later in the day, when you may have leisure to apply yourself to it.

[*Sweeps out into the hall, hugging her grievance to the last.*]

LADY DENISON [*almost in tears*]. Now *she's* offended. Really, it's *too* bad!

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Mr. Hylton's system!

LADY DENISON. I'd no idea people who taught German were so sensitive. I ought never to have said I would learn it.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*wrathfully*]. You ought never to have asked Miss Triggs here at all. Nor any of these people. Mrs. Horrocks, General Bonsor, Mr. Verreker. They're all impossible.

LADY DENISON [*protesting feebly*]. I don't see what's the matter with Mr. Verreker. *He's* not been doing anything tiresome, has he?

[*But the gods are against LADY DENISON, for this is the precise moment selected by MARGERY to rush into the room, breathless and happy, from the garden, with an announcement that almost turns her relatives to stone.*]

MARGERY. Mother, dear, is that you? [Kisses her.] I've got such a piece of news for you. What do you think? Hugh and I are engaged to be married!

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MRS. EVERSLIGH [with an uneasy feeling that this is not HYLTON's Christian name]. Hugh?

MARGERY [turning to her]. Mr. Verreker.

VERREKER enters from the garden.

Here he is. [To her mother again, speaking very rapidly and excitedly.] He asked me to marry him down by the lake, and I said I would. Aren't you pleased?

LADY DENISON [bewildered]. Margery!

MRS. EVERSLIGH [furious]. Really!

[What MRS. EVERSLIGH would have said had time been given her to put her indignation into words will never be known, for at this moment the luncheon gong rings loudly, and MARGERY, who is blissfully unconscious that her news is not delighting everybody, makes for the door, chattering to the last.]

MARGERY. Oh, there's the luncheon gong, and my hands are simply piggy. We've been grubbing up ferns for my rockery. So are yours, Hugh. Run and wash them, dear. You must wait to be congratulated till afterwards.

VERREKER. All right.

[Goes out, with the shamefaced laugh of the newly engaged man.]

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I must say!

[But words fail her.]

MARGERY. I can't stop now, Aunt Emily, or we shall be late, and then the General will be furious.

[MARGERY runs off into the hall gaily. MRS. EVERSLIGH gasps with indignation. She turns on her sister fiercely.]

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MRS. EVERSLIGH. And *you* said Margery was going to marry Mr. Hylton! Muriel, you must be a perfect fool.

LADY DENISON [*stung by the injustice of this accusation*]. I didn't, Emily. *You* said it.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*impatiently*]. Well, there's no use arguing about that now. You must put a stop to this engagement at once, without a moment's delay.

LADY DENISON. Yes. [*With decision*.] I shall speak to Margery about it directly after luncheon. It's very naughty of her. I shall certainly refuse to sanction the engagement.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Better speak to her at once.

LADY DENISON [*weakly*]. I think I'll wait till after luncheon.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*vindictively*]. Mr. Hylton again! If it weren't for him Mr. Verreker would never have been invited to stay.

LADY DENISON [*shaking her head sadly*]. Yes. I really must give up going to hear Mr. Hylton. The results are *too* unpleasant. I didn't mind asking the wrong people to the house and trying to make them happy. But I can't have them proposing to my daughter. I must make a stand against it all, now, at once, while I remember.

[*Rises and goes to bell.*

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*wondering what fresh folly her sister is going to commit*]. What are you going to do?

LADY DENISON. Dismiss Soames!

[*LADY DENISON rings—and the curtain falls.*

ACT III

SCENE.—*Still the Denisons' drawing-room. Time, an hour later. When the curtain rises the stage is empty.* LADY DENISON, MRS. EVERSLÉIGH, MRS. HORROCKS, MISS TRIGGS, MARGERY, HYLTON, VERREKER and GENERAL BONSOR *troop in from luncheon.* The GENERAL's voice is heard booming across the hall as he loses himself in another of his interminable stories, even before he actually reaches the room.

GENERAL BONSOR. . . . It was at Jubbulpore it happened. We were up there after Pig. Travers was there, I remember, and Hindley, of the 106th. [Entering.] No, not Hindley. He died the year before. Bellairs. First-rate chap Bellairs. In the police. I'll tell you a story about *him* some day. He married Molly Henderson, daughter of old Henderson, the judge. Fat Henderson we used to call him because he was so stout. Well, as I was saying, Travers and I were *alone* together—

VERREKER [to MARGERY]. Poor Travers!

GENERAL BONSOR [wheeling round]. What, sir!

VERREKER. Nothing.

GENERAL BONSOR. Did I hear you remark, *Poor Travers*?

VERREKER. I hope not, General. You were not intended to.

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GENERAL BONSOR [*scorning this evasion*]. Did you remark it, sir ?

LADY DENISON [*nervously*]. I think you must have misunderstood Mr. Verreker, General.

MRS. HORROCKS [*in loud, grating tones, not looking at the GENERAL, but seeming to address the company at large*]. And, anyhow, the subject is scarcely worth pursuing, is it ? Unless we are to be kept listening to this story the *whole* afternoon.

GENERAL BONSOR. I had not intended to detain Mrs. Horrocks. [Glares.]

MARGERY [*coming to the rescue*]. Don't you think we'd better all go out for a walk while the sunshine lasts ? It's a pity not to make the most of it.

LADY DENISON [*who has been waiting in vain for a moment to speak to her daughter*]. Margery.

MARGERY. Yes, mother. In a moment. Mrs. Horrocks, you'll come, won't you ?

MRS. HORROCKS. Thank you. I shall be delighted.

MARGERY. Miss Triggs ? [Miss TRIGGS bows graciously.] General ?

GENERAL BONSOR [*decidedly, having noted that Mrs. HORROCKS is to be of the party*]. No, thank ye.

MARGERY. Mr. Hylton ?

HYLTON. I'm afraid I must stay at home and finish my proofs.

LADY DENISON. Margery, I want to speak to you before— What is it ?

[*This to WILLIAM, who has entered a moment before with letters on a salver.*]

WILLIAM. The post, my lady. [LADY DENISON

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takes her letters.] And could Mrs. Meredith speak to you for a moment ?

LADY DENISON [*harassed*]. Oh, very well.

[LADY DENISON looks for a moment towards her daughter, but, finding her still absorbed in the duty of peace-making, gives up the attempt to speak to her in despair and goes out. MARGERY is quite unconscious of her mother's agitation, as she sat too far from her at luncheon to notice that she was not in her usual spirits, and, moreover, when you are practising True Hospitality, depression at the luncheon table is not sufficiently uncommon to excite remark.]

MARGERY. That makes three. Who else ?

WILLIAM [*to GENERAL BONSOR*]. A letter for you, sir.

GENERAL BONSOR [*taking it*]. Thank ye. [WILLIAM goes out.] Excuse me. [Opens it and begins to read.

MARGERY. Will you come, Aunt Emily ?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. No, thanks. I am going to drive with your mother.

MARGERY. Very well. Hugh, four. That'll be all.

VERREKER [*chaffing her*]. You don't ask whether I want to come.

MARGERY [*with mock severity*]. You've got to come whether you like it or not. As a penance.

VERREKER. All right—if it's clearly understood that it's a penance. I'd rather like a walk.

MARGERY. Let's all go and get ready, then. Come, Mrs. Horrocks. Meet in the hall in five minutes.

[All go out save HYLTON, the GENERAL and MRS. EVERSLIGH. MRS. EVERSLIGH picks up a book

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which she is in the middle of, HYLTON glances through an article in "The Fortnightly." The GENERAL is reading his letter.]

HYLTON. This article in *The Fortnightly* on Farm Colonies is worth reading, Mrs. Eversleigh.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [declining the suggestion firmly]. Thank you. I've had quite enough philanthropy lately without that. [Returns to her book.

GENERAL BONSOR [with an emphasis which makes Mrs. EVERSLIGH positively jump]. Well !!!

MRS. EVERSLIGH [irritably]. Really, General Bonsor, these sudden exclamations are most disconcerting. Is anything the matter ?

GENERAL BONSOR [too full of his subject even to notice the rebuke]. Mrs. Eversleigh, is Lady Denison aware of the character of that young man ?

MRS. EVERSLIGH [bored]. Of Mr. Hylton ?

GENERAL BONSOR. No ! No ! Of that young man who has just left the room. What's his name ? Verreker.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [interested at once]. I don't know. You'd better ask her.

GENERAL BONSOR. I shall certainly do so. I venture to think she is *not* aware of it. I venture to think that when she has read what my old friend Nicholson, Toby Nicholson, says about him [taps letter fiercely] she will scarcely consider him a fit person to invite to meet me !

MRS. EVERSLIGH [with elaborate irony]. I shouldn't build on *that* if I were you. My sister has peculiar views about hospitality.

[But the irony is completely wasted on the GENERAL,

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as he is not in the secrets of the HYLTONIAN system of philanthropy.]

GENERAL BONSOR. Can you tell me where I shall find her?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. She'll be back in a moment, I believe. She only went to speak to the housekeeper. Here she is.

[And, in fact, LADY DENISON re-enters at this moment, but her interview with the housekeeper seems to have been of a depressing kind, for she looks more woebegone than ever.]

GENERAL BONSOR [*breaking out*]. Lady Denison—

LADY DENISON [*to Mrs. EVERSLIGH, fussily*]. Emily, the cook wants to leave now. She has found out about Anson, and says she can't remain with me after the month. I told her Soames was leaving, but she said . . . *[Suddenly becoming conscious that GENERAL BONSOR is in the room, and is burning to speak to her.]* I beg your pardon, General. I thought Emily was alone.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*with icy distinctness*]. General Bonsor has some news to communicate to you about Mr. Verreker. I needn't say of an unfavourable character.

LADY DENISON. Emily!

[Collapses.]

HYLTON [*rising*]. Perhaps I'd better—

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*grimly*]. On the contrary. Mr. Hylton had better remain. It's all *his* doing, as usual.

HYLTON [*puzzled*]. Mine?

LADY DENISON [*almost distracted with anxiety*]. Never mind that now, Emily. But, General, if

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you *have* anything unpleasant to say, *will* you say it as quickly as possible? Then we shall get it over.

GENERAL BONSOR. I will do so, Lady Denison. [Clears his throat.] I have just received a letter from my friend, Colonel Nicholson, who commands the Munster Regiment. . . . Nicholson is an old friend of mine. I met him first at Poonah in '72 . . . or was it '73—

MRS. EVERSLIGH. *Please* do not bother about dates, General Bonsor! If you will *kindly* come to the point.

GENERAL BONSOR [*rearing like an old war-horse under this affront*]. Certainly, Mrs. Eversleigh. . . . I wrote to Colonel Nicholson a week ago. And as I happened to hear Verreker say he had been in the Munsters, I mentioned that he was staying down here. . . . [Off again.] The Munsters are the old 43rd, you know. The Fighting Forty-Third. I remember them in the old days when Tom Ferguson was in command. Ferguson and I—

LADY DENISON [*pathetically*]. General, *would* you mind leaving that part out and telling us what Colonel Nicholson said about Mr. Verreker—if he said anything? It's really important.

GENERAL BONSOR [*stiffly*]. I was about to do so—when you interrupted me, Lady Denison. I will do so now. . . . Colonel Nicholson says . . . Where the deuce does he say it? I'll give it you in his own words. [Fumbles for glasses. LADY DENISON is nearly wild with nervous impatience.] “I'm surprised to hear you've got young Verreker staying with you.” [Looks up at LADY DENISON] . . . He means with *you*, of course. [Returns to letter.]

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“I thought people fought rather shy of asking him. Small blame to 'em. He got into an ugly scrape while he was with us. Spent money belonging to the mess which he couldn't pay back. Might have gone to prison if the thing hadn't been hushed up. Had to send in his papers. Deuced ugly business altogether. Old Wakley, whom you remember at Dum Dum . . .” [Looking up again.] That's all.

MRS. EVERSLÉIGH [*feeling the situation to be beyond her powers of comment*]. There, Mr. Hylton!

HYLTON [*completely fogged*]. What is it, Mrs. Eversleigh? I'm really quite in the dark.

LADY DENISON. Hush, Emily. You forget Mr. Hylton doesn't know yet. Nobody knows. [To the GENERAL, with an earnestness absurdly out of proportion to the importance of the request.] General, would you mind leaving us with Mr. Hylton for a few minutes? My sister-in-law and I would like to consult him. We are *very* much obliged to you for letting us hear the letter—and would you please go at once?

GENERAL BONSOR. Certainly.

[The GENERAL goes out into the garden, much offended. The moment he is gone, LADY DENISON turns to HYLTON and pours out her lamentable tale.]

LADY DENISON. Mr. Hylton, what is to be done? You heard what General Bonsor said about Mr. Verreker just now? Mr. Verreker proposed to my daughter this morning and she accepted him.

HYLTON [*horrified*]. Impossible!

LADY DENISON [*dolefully*]. I wish it were. Margery

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came and told us about it just before luncheon. Of course I was most indignant, and meant to tell her at once that I couldn't think of allowing it, but the luncheon gong rang, and I've had no opportunity of speaking to her since. And it's all your fault, Mr. Hylton, as Emily says, for if it hadn't been for you I should never have asked Mr. Verreker to the house. I really knew nothing about him, and only did it out of kindness. And now the General tells us this !

HYLTON [*much moved*]. Lady Denison, I can't say how distressed I am that this has occurred. I would have done anything to prevent it.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I'm glad to find there are limits even to *your* toleration, Mr. Hylton.

HYLTON [*indignantly*]. Surely you never supposed I could *approve* of such a marriage ?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I don't know. You champion Miss Triggs as a visitor—and Soames as a butler. Why not Mr. Verreker as a son-in-law ?

HYLTON [*distressed*]. You can't really think that, Mrs. Eversleigh. Knowing what I now know about Verreker how could I possibly think him a fit husband for a girl like Miss Denison ?

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*shrugging her shoulders*]. Well, well, you don't think so. That's the main thing. The question is, what is to be done ?

LADY DENISON. Of course I shall forbid the engagement. I meant to do so before. But this puts it absolutely out of the question.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. And Mr. Hylton must use his influence with Margery. It's the least he can do.

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HYLTON. Anything I can do, Mrs. Eversleigh, you may be quite sure will be done.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. And let's hope she'll prove amenable for everybody's sake.

HYLTON [*confidently*]. I've no fears on *that* score. When Miss Denison learns Verreker's true character she won't *wish* to marry him any longer. It would be impossible.

LADY DENISON [*eagerly*]. Yes. Wouldn't it! It's not as if Margery were an *unprincipled* girl or a *bad* girl in any way. She's a very *good* girl. And a *religious* girl. And so she'll do what we tell her.

HYLTON [*who has been pacing restlessly about, and is now by the open French window, turns round sharply*]. Here is Miss Denison, coming across the lawn. With Verreker.

LADY DENISON [*feeling that this is the last straw*]. With Mr. Verreker? How unfortunate!

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I don't see that it matters. He would have to be told what we think about him in any case. Why not now?

LADY DENISON [*flustered*]. Very well. You must help me, Mr. Hylton. I'm so unaccustomed to having to manage Margery. She generally manages me.

[MARGERY comes in from the terrace. VERREKER limps by her side, leaning a little on her arm. MARGERY is so full of VERREKER's mishap that she is quite unconscious of the frigidity with which it is received by her audience.]

MARGERY. Is that you, mother? Poor Hugh has sprained his ankle. [To VERREKER.] Be careful

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of that step. [*To her mother again.*] Isn't it unfortunate? He slipped as we were going down the bank in the old spinney. I sent the others on, and brought him back by the short way across the lawn. [*To VERREKER.*] Is it hurting much?

VERREKER. Oh no. It's nothing.

MARGERY. Sit down here. [*Drags up sofa.*] And you must put your foot up and give it a complete rest. And if it's not better this evening we'll send for Dr. Jenkins. [*To LADY DENISON.*] Wasn't it lucky we hadn't got farther from the house when it happened, mother? It's so bad to walk with a sprain.

VERREKER. It's not a sprain really, Margery. Just a twist. That's all.

LADY DENISON [*sternly*]. Will you please not call my daughter Margery, Mr. Verreker?

MARGERY [*astonished*]. Not call me Margery? But, mother, we're *engaged*!

LADY DENISON. You are *not* engaged, Margery. I cannot allow you to be engaged—at least, not to Mr. Verreker.

MARGERY [*still more astonished*]. Why not, mother?

LADY DENISON. He knows quite well. And I think he's not behaved honourably in asking you to be engaged to him. When you know his true character you will think so too.

MARGERY. Do you mean about his leaving the army?

LADY DENISON. Yes.

MARGERY. But I know about that.

LADY DENISON. I don't think you do. Not *all*

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about it. You imagine, as I did, that he left the army because he had been foolish or got into debt or something. It was not that. Mr. Verreker left the army for a far more serious reason, which you know nothing about.

MARGERY. Oh yes, I do, mother dear. Hugh told me all about it this morning.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. He *told* you!

MARGERY. Yes. Before he asked me to marry him.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Really!

LADY DENISON [*bewildered*]. Margery! It's impossible. You would never have accepted him if he had told you. Mr. Verreker is not a fit person for any girl to marry. He is dishonest.

MARGERY [*laying hand instinctively on VERREKER's shoulder*]. Mother!

LADY DENISON. He spent money that didn't belong to him, money that had been entrusted to him.

MARGERY [*bravely*]. I know. And when the time came he couldn't pay it back. He told me all that quite fully before he proposed to me. I thought it was very honourable of him.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Honourable!

MARGERY. Yes. Wasn't it honourable? To tell me, I mean. He might have said nothing about it, or at least concealed the worst part hoping we should never find out. But he didn't. He told me everything. [*Softly*] I think that was partly what made me say "yes."

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Margery! You must be out of your senses.

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MARGERY. Why? It's all over now, quite over and done with. What is past is past. [HYLTON starts guiltily as he recognises this fatal phrase.] It happened four years ago. Surely we might forget it now?

LADY DENISON. No, Margery. A thing like this can never be forgotten.

MARGERY. I can't think that. One should always forgive wrongdoing, shouldn't one? And if one forgives, why not forget?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Rubbish!

LADY DENISON. Mr. Verreker, I must speak very seriously to my daughter about this. But there's no need for *you* to stay if you'd rather not. It would only be painful for you to hear. Would you rather leave us for a little?

VERREKER [calmly]. Thank you, Lady Denison. I don't mind.

[Settles himself more comfortably on his sofa. Pause.]

MARGERY [gently]. Mother, aren't you all being rather hard on poor Hugh? We all do things we're ashamed of sometimes. Not quite the same things as this perhaps, but still *wrong* things. And if we're sorry, and try not to do them again, oughtn't that to be enough?

MRS. EVERSLIGH [snaps]. No!

MARGERY [confidently]. I'm sure Mr. Hylton thinks so.

HYLTON. No, Miss Denison. In this matter I agree with Mrs. Eversleigh.

MARGERY. Mr. Hylton!

HYLTON. Your mother has told you what she

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wishes. I think you should obey her. It is your duty.

[Pause.]

MARGERY [*slowly*]. Of course, one should obey one's parents I know. . . . But there are other duties as well.

HYLTON [*earnestly*]. Miss Denison, I've no right to speak to you about this, or to urge you in any way. And if you resent it I cannot complain. But the friendship I feel for you and your mother, the kindness you have always shown me, makes me risk that. Break off this engagement. Break it off, I beg of you. It is impossible that a girl like you should be happy with such a man as Mr. Verreker.

MARGERY [*quite simply*]. But one shouldn't only think of *happiness* when one marries, should one?

HYLTON. What do you mean?

MARGERY. I mean there are other things. One would like to be happy, of course. But other things are more important. Helping people, for instance.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*outraged*]. Are you going to marry Mr. Verreker because you want to *help* him?

MARGERY [*eagerly*]. Of course. This morning when Mr. Hylton and I were talking about Hugh, he said there was so much that was good in him that only needed bringing out. That the eyes of his soul had not been opened yet. And he said that if he fell into good hands he would be all right, but if he fell into bad hands he might go on being careless and indifferent always [*Brightly*.] So I thought if he married me I might prevent him from falling into bad hands.

HYLTON [*much distressed*]. But when I was talking

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to you about Mr. Verreker this morning I never dreamed of your *marrying* him.

MARGERY. Nor did I—then. But afterwards, when he asked me, I remembered. And so I said yes. I'm sure I did right.

[*Lays hand on VERREKER's.*

HYLTON [*at his wits' end*]. Miss Denison, this is terrible. I assure you what you are doing is not right but wrong. It is quite right that you should want to help Mr. Verreker, of course. But it is not right that you should marry him.

MARGERY. But perhaps it is only by marrying Hugh that I *can* help him? You see, it's not easy for a girl to help a man, however much she may wish to. They see so little of each other. And if you're really to influence people you must be *with* them, mustn't you? But when people are married they are always together, and then it's easy. So I'm sure I'm doing right in marrying Hugh. When a girl marries she should choose some one she can do good to, some one who needs her. Now I think perhaps Hugh *does* need me, for he's not always been a very good man so far. He's been lazy and rather selfish, and not very thoughtful for others. I'm going to cure him of *that*! Am I not, Hugh?

VERREKER [*half smiling*]. If you can, Margery.

MARGERY [*her face kindling*]. And that's really *worth* doing, isn't it? You see, if I married a *good* man—like you, Mr. Hylton—I couldn't help *him* at all. He'd be quite good already. But Hugh has done foolish things and wrong things, as we know. I can help him.

LADY DENISON. Margery, I think you ought to

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listen to what Mr. Hylton says, and what I say, and do what we ask. It's very wrong of you to be so obstinate. You know we're thinking only of your good.

MARGERY. Yes, but are you thinking of *Hugh's* good, mother?

LADY DENISON [*plaintively*]. What does she mean?

MARGERY. Would it help *him* if I broke it off?

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*losing patience*]. Tck! Who ever heard of marrying a man to *help* him.

MARGERY. Why not, Aunt Emily? [*Feeling that her logic is irrefragable.*] Mr. Hylton always says the only real way of helping people is to love them. And if one *loves* people of course one should *marry* them.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. *Loves* them! So that's it, is it! You're not marrying Mr. Verreker because you want to help him but because you've fallen in love with him. And you ought to be ashamed of yourself.

MARGERY. Of course I love Hugh. What is there to be ashamed of in that?

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*angrily*]. Is there nothing to be ashamed of in wanting to marry a worthless man knowing him to be worthless? You have heard of men marrying worthless women, I suppose? Nobody thinks *they're* performing a moral duty and setting an example to their fellows. On the contrary, we think them weak or vicious. What you are doing is exactly what they do. Only they have the grace not to talk morality about it.

MARGERY [*giving Mrs. EVERSLIGH up as HYLTON*]
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ACT III

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has done before her]. I don't expect you to understand, Aunt Emily. You never do like the way mother and I look at things, do you ?

LADY DENISON [*miserably*]. Oh, don't bring *me* into this, please.

MARGERY. Very well, mother. But I did think *you* would be on my side. And Mr. Hylton. [*Laying her hand on VERREKER's protectingly.*] I love Hugh, and I want to help him. There's nothing strange in that, is there ? When one wants to help people one always does get to love them. That's the splendid thing about helping people. [Pause.]

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Well, there's no use arguing with Margery while she's like this. She evidently has no moral sense whatever !

LADY DENISON. Mr. Verreker, I appeal to *you*. You see what Margery is doing. Release her from this engagement. She is merely sacrificing herself from a fantastic sense of duty.

VERREKER [*with dangerous politeness*]. Surely not ? If so, I have gravely misunderstood Mrs. Eversleigh. I thought it was Margery's fantastic sense of affection she objected to ?

MARGERY. Hugh, dear !

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*fiercely*]. If you are going to insult me, Mr. Verreker—— !

VERREKER. I really beg your pardon. Perhaps I oughtn't to have said that. But some not very pleasant things have been said about *me*, haven't they ?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. And with reason. A man of your antecedents has no right to propose to the daughter of the house in which he is staying. It is

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taking advantage of her inexperience. It is dis-honourable.

VERREKER [*calmly*]. Is that so? Then I'm probably rather lacking in the finer sense about these things. . . . But I suppose every one is inclined to find excuses for his own misdeeds while remaining inflexibly severe towards his neighbours'. That's the foundation of all morality, isn't it, Hylton?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I should have thought *stealing* . . . !

VERREKER [*as if he were considering the point*]. Yes. Stealing's an ugly word, isn't it? It even makes *me* uncomfortable. . . . And yet if you understood the whole circumstances you might take a more lenient view. But that, of course, would be a very bad thing for morality. So no doubt you'd rather not.

HYLTON. Lady Denison, if Mr. Verreker has anything to tell you that will put a more favourable light on the General's story—

VERREKER. The General's? So *he* told you?

LADY DENISON. He heard it from Colonel Nicholson, who commands your old regiment.

VERREKER. Yes, yes. I remember. He said he was writing to him. Poor General, so he really has been able to finish a story for once!

HYLTON. I was going to say that it would be only fair to give Mr. Verreker every chance of defending himself.

[There is a moment's pause, during which they wait for him to speak. Then he begins. His tone is quiet and unimpassioned, almost as if the case were not his own but some one else's, and his voice never falters.]

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It is a statement of fact, not an appeal for pity, and therefore any display of emotion would be out of place. Perhaps he feels this. Anyhow, he makes none.]

VERREKER. Oh, I don't think it amounts to a defence. Merely a statement of the case from the person who knows most about it—the criminal, as Mrs. Eversleigh would say. I was an extravagant young fool. The regiment was an expensive one. I had a small allowance. I had lost money over cards—and other things—to richer men than I was—who, by the way, ought never to have played with me at all. Like an idiot, I thought I must pay my debts to *them* whatever happened. You know the nonsense that is talked about a debt of honour. [*With a bitter sneer on the word.*] To do that I used money belonging to the mess which happened to be in my hands. Of course I hoped to pay it back at once, or I shouldn't have done it. Equally, of course, I failed to do so. The horse that was simply bound to win lost, and I played cards for a whole week and never held a trump. The usual thing. When things were pretty desperate I cabled to Uncle Montague—I was in India at the time—asking him to send me a hundred pounds by return. [*Wearily*]. Of course, I lied to him about the reason. Everybody does lie, I suppose, about that sort of reason. I said I owed it to tailors and people, I remember. Naturally, Uncle Mont didn't see the force of sending me a hundred pounds without haggling about it. Uncles always do haggle about money, I believe. At least, mine do. So Uncle Mont haggled, and like a young ass, instead

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of going straight to the Colonel or the money-lenders I faked the accounts. It was purely a temporary expedient. I knew the money would turn up in a week or two. It was merely a question of gaining time. But, as luck would have it, some one with an elementary knowledge of arithmetic happened to glance at the accounts. He spotted something was wrong and told the others, and instead of coming to me they went to the Colonel. The Colonel sent for me, and there was no end of a row. I tried to make him understand, but he couldn't. The stupidity of military men has been proverbial in all ages. I'm a bit of a fool myself, as you will have noticed. He stormed, and I was sulky. My borrowing the money intending to repay it he could *just* understand, but faking the accounts to conceal the fact was beyond him. Though it was the logical consequence of the other if the thing was to be kept dark. When the fat was in the fire Uncle Mont's cheque turned up. But by that time we'd all lost our tempers, the Colonel was prancing round about the *honour* of the regiment [*another bitter sneer*], and I had to send in my papers.

HYLTON [*half to himself*]. Poor fellow.

VERREKER. Eh ?

HYLTON. Nothing.

MARGERY [*triumphant*]. Mr. Hylton, I knew *you'd* understand. Thank you. [Pause.]

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*acidly*]. Well, Mr. Verreker, you've made out a very clever case, and you've put it very glibly. It must have taken you some time to prepare.

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VERREKER [*his tone if possible more cold and unimpassioned than before*]. Just four years, Mrs. Eversleigh. It happened four years ago, and I've not had much else to think of since. It was a confoundedly silly thing to do, as I said, and I've been wondering ever since how I came to do it. The result of my consideration is the story I've told you. I don't ask you to believe it, of course. But it's quite true.

HYLTON. I believe it, Verreker. And I'm more sorry for you than I can say. If I've said anything that was harsh or unjustifiable please forgive me.

VERREKER. Not at all, my dear fellow.

LADY DENISON. It's all dreadfully sad, Mr. Verreker. I see that. But still, it doesn't alter the facts, does it? You have had to leave the army. Your reputation is ruined. And that makes you not a fit husband for Margery.

VERREKER. I feel that, Lady Denison.

MARGERY. Hugh!

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Then why did you propose to her?

VERREKER [*shrugs*]. A sudden impulse, I suppose. That's how most people propose, isn't it? If they stopped to think they'd think better of it, and then no one would ever marry at all. Which would perhaps be the wisest plan for all parties.

LADY DENISON. Still, in your case you must admit there were special reasons.

VERREKER [*dispassionately*]. I don't know. How many men are fit husbands for the girls they marry? One in a hundred? One in a thousand? Girls are so ridiculously innocent. And men are so

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ridiculously depraved. I'm not so very much worse than the others. Only I was stupider. And that ruined me. But it was four years ago. And I'm not likely to do it again. A man doesn't play the fool like that twice. One pays too dear for it. Considered as a husband, I'm probably the better for the experience. I've learnt by it. [Pause.]

LADY DENISON [*making a last appeal*]. Mr. Verreker, what you say is quite true. And I dare say you're not really worse than many men, though the world judges things like this more hardly than other things. But we are *in* the world, and we must accept its judgment as we cannot alter it. If you marry Margery *she* will have to suffer for what *you* have done. I don't think you want her to do that. Be generous and release her from her promise.

VERREKER [*quite sincerely*]. My dear Lady Denison, I put myself entirely in Margery's hands. If she wishes to end our engagement she is absolutely free to do so. I assert no claim over her whatever. I agree with you that she would only be acting wisely to break it off, and I sha'n't dream of blaming her if she does so. But you mustn't ask *me* to break it off. A man can't do that. But if Margery wants her freedom she has only to speak.

HYLTON [*enthusiastic*]. That's fine of you, Verreker. That's noble, on my soul. You really *are* a good fellow. I know what it must cost you to give up a girl like Miss Denison. I honour you for it. [Holds out hand.]

VERREKER [*taking it*]. Thanks, my dear chap. But you mustn't be too precipitate. I haven't given her up yet. Margery hasn't spoken.

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LADY DENISON. Margery, dear, you *will* break it off?

MARGERY [*firmly*]. No, mother. As long as Hugh wants me I shall stand by him.

LADY DENISON [*tearfully*]. Then you don't love your mother.

MARGERY [*going to her impulsively, and putting her cheek against hers*]. Of course I love you, mother dear. But I love Hugh, too. [Pause.]

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*firing a parting shot*]. Well, I suppose there's no more to be said. If Margery is determined to ruin herself nobody can prevent her. *You*, of course, will continue to forbid the engagement, Muriel, but Margery is of age, and if she chooses to defy you and marry this Mr. Verreker she can do so. But in that case I hope you will entirely refuse to make her any allowance, and, in fact, will disinherit her.

LADY DENISON. What nonsense, Emily. Of course Margery must have an allowance. What else is she to live on? Especially as, I suppose, Mr. Verreker has nothing.

VERREKER. Next to nothing.

LADY DENISON. Very well, then. Naturally I shall have to help them. And as for disinheriting her, that's impossible, even if it were just, as I've no other children. No, Margery must be provided for in any case. I'm sorry she is unwilling to do as I wish, and I think this engagement terribly unwise and unsuitable. But I suppose she's very fond of Hugh [*sighs*] just as I was very fond of Charlie before I married him. And so she must do as she likes.

MARGERY. Darling mother! [Kisses her.] Now

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you're being like yourself again instead of being like Aunt Emily—which doesn't suit you one bit. I always knew you'd agree with me really—and Mr. Hylton [*with a bright glance at him*—though you took rather longer than I expected. Hugh, give mother a kiss like a dutiful son-in-law, and say you think her the best woman in the world.

VERREKER [*drily*]. I think I'll spare poor Lady Denison *that*. She's had a great deal to put up with during the past hour.

MARGERY [*remorsefully*]. Poor mother! I suppose she has.

VERREKER. I hope, however, later on she'll get more reconciled to things. She can't really dislike me as much as she thinks, otherwise she wouldn't have asked me here.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*with a bitter smile*]. I'm afraid I really must disabuse you of *that* idea, Mr. Verreker. My sister-in-law has curious views of hospitality. She doesn't ask people to her house because she likes them or thinks them pleasant acquaintances, but because they are disagreeable or disreputable, or haven't anywhere else to go. It's a new form of philanthropy. Mr. Hylton invented it. [VERREKER *bursts into a shout of delighted laughter*.] You seem amused.

VERREKER. I am. [*Laughs again.*] How delicious! So *that's* why I was invited! Because I was down on my luck and wasn't asked to many houses! And I thought it was because of my delightful society.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*venomously*]. You were certainly strangely mistaken.

VERREKER [*much amused*]. So it seems. And *that*

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explains why all these other people are here, I suppose ? I thought they were rather a damaged lot. Old Bonsor, Miss Triggs, Firket, that appalling Mrs. Horrocks, Hylton, who's an excellent chap but quite mad. *[Mischievously.]* And you too, I dare say, Mrs. Eversleigh ?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. *I*, sir ! Certainly not ! *I* am here because I am Lady Denison's sister-in-law.

VERREKER *[easily].* That's no reason. Lots of people hate their sisters-in-law. I know I simply loathe my brothers.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I am glad to think that Lady Denison is unlike you in that as in every respect.

LADY DENISON *[soothing her].* Of course, Emily. I asked you because I like to have you here. And Mr. Hylton, too. I must invite the people I like occasionally.

VERREKER. I see. Well, Lady Denison, I think it's a splendid idea of yours, far more amusing than the ordinary way of inviting people. And the more dreadful they are the more amusing it must be. Margery and I must certainly take to it when *we* have a house.

LADY DENISON. I don't see anything *amusing* in it, Mr. Verreker. In fact, it's often extremely unpleasant, and leads to most regrettable complications.

VERREKER *[genially].* Such as *my* getting engaged to Margery ?

MRS. EVERSLIGH *[snaps].* That among other things.

VERREKER *[to whom the finer shades of "beginning one's charity at home" have scarcely yet revealed themselves].* Do none of them *know* ?

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LADY DENISON. No.

VERREKER. Why not? They'd be awfully amused.

[The voice of the GENERAL is heard on the terrace humming a cheerful stave. VERREKER looks round at the sound, just in time to see him approaching the French window on the left of the fireplace. A smile of reckless mischief lights up his face.]

By Jove, here's the General! I must tell him.

LADY DENISON *[despairing entreaty]*. Please! Please!

VERREKER *[laughing gaily]*. Yes, I must. I owe him one for telling you all that about me. You owe him one, too. He's given you a most uncomfortable afternoon.

[The GENERAL enters by the window on the left, unconscious of his doom.]

GENERAL BONSOR *[quite amiable, but feeling that these modern habits of unpunctuality must not be allowed to go unremarked.]* Isn't it tea-time, Lady Denison? I think so.

VERREKER *[in high good humour]*. Long past. I say, General, why have you been telling tales about me to Lady Denison?

GENERAL BONSOR *[turning on him fiercely, all his feathers up, like an angry turkey-cock]*. If it comes to my knowledge, sir, that a man who is staying in a lady's house with me is not a person whom other people wish to meet, I make it a rule to inform my hostess of the fact.

VERREKER *[heartily]*. And a very good rule, too. Only Lady Denison doesn't ask people to her house

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whom *other* people wish to meet. It's against her principles.

LADY DENISON [*protesting*]. Mr. Verreker!

GENERAL BONSOR [*Gobbling with indignation*]. Upon my word, sir . . . !

[*But VERREKER declines to be interrupted either by the GENERAL's anger or LADY DENISON's anguish, and goes on relentlessly. The others listen in horrified fascination. Every one is too much absorbed to notice the return of MRS. HORROCKS and MISS TRIGGS, who select this unlucky moment to enter by the French window on the right. They listen spellbound.*]

VERREKER [*enjoying himself immensely*]. Lady Denison selects her visitors on philanthropic grounds—because they're disagreeable or disreputable or merely boring. It's a form of self-denial with her. That's why she asked you. That's why she asked me. That's why she asked all of us.

GENERAL BONSOR [*stunned*]. What!

MRS. HORROCKS [*defiant*]. What!!!

VERREKER [*swinging round as if he were shot at the sound of MRS. HORROCKS's raucous voice. To himself*]. Good Heavens! Mrs. Horrocks!

MRS. HORROCKS [*sternly*]. Yes, sir, Mrs. Horrocks. Miss Triggs and I returned from our walk just in time to hear your extraordinary statement. [*Bleat from MISS TRIGGS.*] May I ask what truth, if any, it contains?

VERREKER. Really, Mrs. Horrocks, I'm very sorry you should have heard what I said—

MRS. HORROCKS [*cutting him short*]. Is it true, sir? [VERREKER makes hopeless gesture, but says

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nothing.] Lady Denison, perhaps *you* will inform me?

GENERAL BONSOR [*more in sorrow than in anger*]. *Why* was I invited here, Lady Denison?

MISS TRIGGS [*bleating again*]. And *I*?

LADY DENISON [*completely flustered*]. I never meant you to know. I never meant Mr. Verreker to know. It's very unfortunate. Please accept my apologies all of you. I'm most distressed this should have happened.

MRS. HORROCKS. Then it *is* true!

MISS TRIGGS. Really!

LADY DENISON [*meekly*]. I don't think Mr. Verreker need have told the General. It was most inconsiderate of him. But I hope you won't hold *me* responsible.

MISS TRIGGS [*with tearful dignity*]. Will you kindly order the carriage to take me to the station, Lady Denison? I shall leave by the six o'clock train.

MRS. HORROCKS [*haughtily*]. Of course you will not expect *me* to remain.

GENERAL BONSOR [*in hollow accents*]. Nor me! Boring!

LADY DENISON [*much distressed*]. Oh, *need* you all go like that? After all, there's nothing so very dreadful in what you've heard. It was Mr. Hylton's idea.

MISS TRIGGS. That dissenting person! I always *felt* he was an impostor. He tried to make me believe he was a clergyman, I remember.

LADY DENISON. He meant it kindly. We all meant it kindly.

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MRS. HORROCKS [*drawing herself up to her full height*]. Lady Denison, if you cannot understand how insulting this is to *me* I cannot make you do so. But I *should* have thought, considering my birth and connections, I might have claimed a somewhat different treatment. The carriage, please, for the six o'clock train. [*Sweeps out majestically to pack.*]

MISS TRIGGS [*equally unappeased*]. And will you please send some tea to my room. I shall not come down again before I leave.

[*Follows Mrs. Horrocks.*

GENERAL BONSOR [*too broken with the world's ingratitude to protest further.*] Boring !

[*Follows Miss Triggs, shaking his poor old head.* There is a pause while we realise that one of the most tragic things in life is to be a bore—and to know it. MRS. EVERSLIGH, however, not being cursed with the gift of imaginative sympathy, wastes no pity on the GENERAL. Instead of this she turns to her sister, and, metaphorically speaking, knocks her out of the ring.]

MRS. EVERSLIGH. This, Muriel, is what comes of beginning one's Charity at Home !

[*LADY DENISON has no reply, as the worm is too crushed to turn—and the curtain falls.*]

ACT IV

SCENE.—*The dining-room at Priors Ashton. A week has passed since Act III, and the time is after dinner. The party is sadly reduced in numbers, for Mrs. HORROCKS, Miss TRIGGS and the GENERAL no longer grace the board with their presence. But HYLTON and VERREKER and Mrs. EVERSLÉIGH remain, and they, and LADY DENISON and her daughter, are sitting over their dessert, shepherded by WILLIAM, who is in sole charge for the present, the abandoned SOAMES having taken his departure. The room is lighted by electric lights on the walls, but there are also shaded candles in silver candlesticks on the table. When the curtain rises WILLIAM is handing fruit.*

WILLIAM [to MRS. EVERSLÉIGH]. Grapes, madam ?

MRS. EVERSLÉIGH [taking some]. What fine grapes you have this year, Muriel.

MARGERY. Aren't they ? I took some to old Biddy Porter to-day. She's been ill.

MRS. EVERSLÉIGH. Who is old Biddy Porter ?

MARGERY. She lives at Ashton Parva in one of those little houses before you get to the church. And she's had influenza, so I thought it would be nice to take her some grapes. She was so pleased.

VERREKER [grimly]. The gardener wasn't.

MARGERY. No. Poor Thomson. He's so funny

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about the fruit. He seems to think we grow it entirely for ourselves. He's quite angry when I give any of it away. He doesn't even like my sending any to the cottage hospital.

LADY DENISON [*anxiously*]. You will be careful with Thomson, won't you, Margery? He's so easily offended. I remember last year when you took all the early peaches to the Workhouse Infirmary just before we were giving some dinner-parties he nearly gave warning. And I don't want to lose him. He's such an excellent gardener.

[WILLIAM, *having finished his duties, goes out.*]

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*as soon as he has closed the door*]. The new butler hasn't come yet?

LADY DENISON. No. We expect him to-morrow. I do hope he'll be a success. He has the highest references.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*sweetly*]. That must be very distressing to Mr. Hylton.

MARGERY. Aunt Emily, you're not to scratch Mr. Hylton. He's been working at proofs all day and now he wants a rest.

VERREKER. Lucky chap!

MARGERY. What do you mean?

VERREKER. To have *you* prescribing *rest* for him. You don't prescribe much rest for *me*!

LADY DENISON. Has Margery been working you very hard, Hugh?

MARGERY. Of course not, mother. Hugh's only talking nonsense.

VERREKER. Am I! Just you listen. This morning I left some soup with Mrs. Green while Margery

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was taking Biddy Porter her grapes. She stopped the carriage at Mrs. Green's and dropped me there. It was nearly half an hour before she came back for me, and I had to hear the history of every disease from which the old lady had ever suffered and to look at her bad leg.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*scandalised*]. Really, Mr. Verreker!

VERREKER [*yielding the point with cheerful alacrity*]. Arm, then. I know it was some part of her poor old body, though I couldn't recognise it. It was quite disgusting. I should have gone away, only Mrs. Green lives four miles from here, and I hate walking when it's hot. However, the carriage came back at last, and then we drove on to the church, which Margery is decorating for some reason or other. I think because the harvest has failed. There I sat in a pew and made a wreath of *mangel-wurzels* to adorn the font.

MARGERY. Not *mangel-wurzels*.

VERREKER. Well, some kind of vegetable. We got back to lunch at last—late, of course. The wreath took so long. And in the afternoon—after a brief interval of repose—I wrote letters on behalf of a certain Mary Gamage who wants to get into an orphanage at Basingstoke—which seems an odd taste. I wrote twenty-five of them.

MARGERY. Only after you'd been coaxed for a whole quarter of an hour. You were quite cross about it, and said you weren't a galley-slave.

VERREKER. Well, I was wrong.

MARGERY. You were very disagreeable.

VERREKER [*equably*]. I know. I hoped we were

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going to quarrel. But you wouldn't. That's the worst of Margery. She never will quarrel.

HYLTON. It's a good fault.

VERREKER. Is it ! However, I wrote twenty-five letters on behalf of Mary Gamage, as I said. And I've got seventy-five still to do. They were to ask subscribers to the orphanage for their votes. I gather some five hundred other people are busily engaged in writing the same number of letters on behalf of *their* orphans, and the subscribers, in common politeness, will have to write to the whole five hundred of us to say they have given their votes to the 501st. They can only vote once. The mere expenditure in postage stamps would suffice to endow another orphanage, not to speak of the waste of my time and theirs. Moreover, I'm given to understand that this ritual is gone through every time the orphanage has a vacancy, and that there are more than a hundred orphanages similarly conducted in this distracted country. Whoever heard of such tomfoolery !

MARGERY. It *is* troublesome, of course. But I don't see how else you could settle whom to let in. There are so many orphans.

VERREKER [*briskly*]. You should put the names in a hat, shake it, and take the one that fell out first.

LADY DENISON. But would people subscribe to orphanages if they didn't get a vote ?

VERREKER. What on earth do they want votes for ?

LADY DENISON. In order that *their* orphans may get in instead of the others.

VERREKER. Another illusion gone ! I used to

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think charitable people gave their money because they were genuinely anxious to do good. I now find on the highest authority that they do it to keep out each other's orphans. Margery, I won't write another letter.

MARGERY [*protesting*]. Oh, Hugh, how horrid of you. If you don't *I* shall have to do them, and you said you would.

VERREKER [*resigned*]. Very well, I suppose I must as I said so. But my faith in charity is shattered. Nothing survives a closer acquaintance. Not even orphanages.

MARGERY [*laughing*]. How absurd you are, Hugh. You know you only talk like that because you think it will shock us. And it doesn't shock us one bit. We only think it silly.

VERREKER. As you please, dear. But if that's the only way in which orphans can be kept alive I think you'd better drown them—and I've been an orphan myself.

LADY DENISON. Do you mind talking about something else for a moment, Hugh? I think I hear William with the coffee, and he mightn't like it.

[WILLIAM comes in and hands coffee, and departs again. While he is doing so HYLTON obligingly comes to the rescue with a new subject.]

HYLTON. Did you get as far as Croome this afternoon, Mrs. Eversleigh?

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Yes. Poor Lady Seathwaite is still in bed. But the doctor says she may be able to come down on Monday.

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VERREKER. What's the matter with Lady Seathwaite?

[MRS. EVERSLIGH *ignores him.*]

LADY DENISON. She has a bad attack of gout. She has it every autumn.

VERREKER. I see. [*Tersely.*] Over-eats herself.

MRS. EVERSLIGH [*sharply*]. Mr. Verreker, will you kindly remember that Lady Seathwaite is a friend of mine? And that I do not care to hear her insulted?

VERREKER [*blandly*]. I'd no intention of insulting her, Mrs. Eversleigh. It was only a suggestion to account for her indisposition.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. A most uncalled-for suggestion.

VERREKER [*with exasperating amiability*]. Very well. I withdraw it. I daresay she eats too little, and suffers from poverty of the blood. Margery shall drive me over to-morrow afternoon, and we'll ask her which it is.

MARGERY. Hugh, Hugh, you're not to laugh at Aunt Emily. She doesn't like it. And we can't possibly go over to-morrow afternoon because you're coming with me to tea at the Vicarage.

VERREKER. Let's skip the tea.

MARGERY. Certainly not. The Willises would be dreadfully hurt if we didn't go. And it's so unkind to disappoint people.

[*The electric light suddenly goes out, leaving only the candles on the table alight.*]

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Good Heavens! What's that?

LADY DENISON [*calmly*]. Only the electric light, Emily.

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MRS. EVERSLIGH. *Only* the electric light !

LADY DENISON. It does happen sometimes. You see, Basset, who looks after the dynamo, isn't really an electrician. He was a footman.

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Then why does he look after the dynamo ?

LADY DENISON. Well, he was out of a place—

MRS. EVERSLIGH. Muriel !

LADY DENISON [*worried*]. What's the matter *now*, Emily ? Nothing else has happened, has it ? . . . [*Going on with her story placidly.*] He was out of a place, as I said. He had been second footman at the Fox-Wilkinsons', at Abbots Ashton. But I'm afraid he sometimes took more to drink than was good for him. At least, he was found one day after luncheon in the dining-room quite intoxicated. So they had to send him away. When Margery heard of it she wanted to have him here—under Soames. But Soames didn't seem to like the idea. He was quite indignant about it, in fact. So as the electric light was being put in just then, Margery said that Basset could be taught to look after the engine. But he's not very skilful as yet, so the light sometimes goes out for hours at a time. I hope it isn't going to to-night. [*The light comes on again. Cheerfully.*] That's better ! [*Depressed.*] Now it's gone again. [*This as the light goes out afresh. A moment later it recovers, then has a series of spasms, and finally settles to work again. LADY DENISON heaves a sigh of relief.*] That's right !

MRS. EVERSLIGH. I thought you had given up engaging your servants on altruistic principles, Muriel ?

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LADY DENISON [*quite simply*]. So I have. But I couldn't send Basset away, could I? I don't think he could get another place. Besides, he's really wonderfully improved. He hardly ever takes too much now. Shall we go? [Rises.]

[LADY DENISON, MRS. EVERSLIGH, and MARGERY *go out*, HYLTON *holding open the door for them*. VERREKER *strolls to the fireplace and leans against the mantelpiece lazily, stretching himself*. HYLTON *returns to his seat*.]

VERREKER [*laughing*]. Lady Denison really is the most absurd person in the world.

HYLTON. Is she?

VERREKER. Yes. But good people always are more or less absurd, aren't they?

HYLTON [*smiling*]. The children of this world *are* wiser than the children of light certainly.

VERREKER. Exactly. And she'll never learn wisdom now, poor lady. She's listened to *you* too long. She'll never get the poison out of her system.

HYLTON. She dismissed Soames.

VERREKER. But keeps Basset. You've won after all. Cigar? [Brings silver box from mantelpiece.]

HYLTON. Thanks.

VERREKER [*re-seating himself*]. Poor Mrs. Eversleigh! How she loathes me! She'll never forgive me for having proposed to Margery.

HYLTON. It doesn't matter. You've Lady Denison on your side.

VERREKER. Thanks to *you*.

HYLTON [*lightly*]. I don't think *I'd* much to do with it.

VERREKER. I know better. If it hadn't been for

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you, Lady Denison would be still unreconciled. I've no illusions on that point.

HYLTON. Miss Denison would have made your peace for you.

VERREKER. Yes. Margery has been a brick all through. She always would be. But you backed her up. I wonder why. [Pause.] Why was it?

HYLTON [*hesitates*]. Perhaps I felt I owed you some amends for the way I behaved when I first heard of your engagement.

VERREKER [*raising his eyebrows*]. I don't know. Your attitude was a perfectly reasonable one. It was a most ridiculous engagement for Margery. *Is*, in fact.

HYLTON [*cheerfully*]. Oh no.

VERREKER. Oh yes. I am a young man with a discreditable past and no future. Margery will have a good deal of money one day. Considered as a match for her it's preposterous.

HYLTON [*shrugs*]. I wasn't thinking of money.

VERREKER. You never are, my dear fellow.

HYLTON [*laughing*]. Besides, you won't be able to squander Miss Denison's money even if you want to. It'll all be tied up strictly in trust.

VERREKER. Yes. I shall be like a dog with a biscuit perpetually on his nose, and nobody ever saying "Paid for."

HYLTON [*laughing again*]. Something like that.

VERREKER. However, I didn't propose to Margery for her money, so I don't know that that matters.

HYLTON. Of course not. You proposed to her because you loved her. Because you couldn't help seeing how good and unselfish and noble she is.

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[VERREKER *raises his eyebrows again.*] No one could help loving Miss Denison. She has all sweet and lovable qualities. She is the most wonderfully good woman I've ever known.

[*And the face of the altruist glows with enthusiasm.*]

VERREKER. Yes. [Reflectively.] It's a great pity.

' HYLTON [*astonished*]. What do you mean ?

VERREKER. People really ought to have some redeeming vices, don't you think ? But Margery's quite impeccable, poor dear. I remember I spoke to her about it before I ever thought of proposing to her.

HYLTON [*deciding that this must be a joke*]. Scoffer !

VERREKER. Not at all. . . . Margery's simply riddled with philanthropy and unselfishness, and the Devil knows what. I call it morbid. I don't believe she ever thinks of herself at all. I've never known any one like her before. I don't believe there *is* any one like her.

HYLTON [*serious again*]. Miss Denison has a curiously perfect character.

VERREKER [*ruefully*]. That's what worries me.

HYLTON. Tck !

VERREKER. It's all very well for you, Hylton. You've not got to live up to it. And if you had I daresay you wouldn't mind. You're a bit of a saint yourself. But for a healthy, easy-going mortal like me it's rather alarming.

HYLTON [*rallying him*]. You'll get used to it.

VERREKER. You think so ?

HYLTON. Yes—with Miss Denison's help. Why, she's helped you already more than you realise.

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You're a different man from what you were a week ago.

VERREKER [*peevishly*]. I know. That's what's so annoying. Fancy *me* distributing soup to old ladies and soliciting votes for a blighted orphan! It's simply disgusting.

HYLTON [*quite sure this is a joke*]. Nonsense, my dear fellow. You like it really, you know.

VERREKER. I beg your pardon! My whole soul—I think that's what you call it?—revolts against it. But I *do* it. That's the miracle. And I did think the age of miracles was past!

HYLTON. The age of miracles will never pass while there are men and women like Miss Denison in the world!

[*The utter sincerity with which Hylton says this makes it impossible to laugh at him, even good-naturedly, as Verreker would like to do. Hylton, with the glow in his face and the look of the mystic in his eyes, is not a man one can laugh at, while his absolute unconsciousness, his total lack of anything like pose or insincerity, makes Verreker feel that he has never liked him or admired him so much before. It may be madness, but it is a divine madness. There is silence between them for a moment while Verreker looks at his companion curiously. Then a slow smile comes into his face, and he speaks quietly.*]

VERREKER. You're a queer chap, Hylton.

HYLTON [*returning to ordinary life with a start*]. Why?

VERREKER [*thinking better of it*]. Nothing.

HYLTON [*with utter conviction*]. Yes. Faith can

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move mountains, now as always. And Miss Denison has faith, faith in goodness and in truth and in self-surrender. She'll convert you yet.

VERREKER [*firmly*]. *No!*

HYLTON. She *will*. You laugh at altruism now. In a year you'll be an altruist yourself. And it's your marriage that will have done it.

VERREKER [*a light dawning on him*]. So that's why you approve of this absurd marriage.

HYLTON [*nods*]. It's to save a soul.

VERREKER. More philanthropy !

HYLTON [*accepting the scoff good-humouredly*]. More philanthropy. This marriage is going to be the making of you. It will help you to find yourself. Your true self.

VERREKER [*sardonically*]. I should have thought I'd managed *that*.

HYLTON [*all the optimist coming out in him*]. You're wrong. Your real self is not the healthy, easy-going person you talk of. It's the strong, self-restrained, self-denying man, Miss Denison will put in his place. [*Enthusiastic.*] There's nothing the love of a really good woman can't do for a man. It brings out all that is fine in his nature, and drives out all that is base. That is what your marriage will do for you !

VERREKER. The deuce it will !

HYLTON [*collapsing under this cold douche—as I'm afraid VERREKER meant him to do*]. But I must apologise for talking to you like this. I'm afraid it bores you.

VERREKER [*a little penitent*]. Not a bit. I like it.

HYLTON [*shaking his head*]. No.

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VERREKER. Yes, I do. In fact, I'm rather interested in the Psychology of Benevolence just now. Please go on.

HYLTON [*laughing*]. Not to-night. Besides, we ought to be moving. [Rises.]

VERREKER. Perhaps so. [Rises. *He seems to reflect for a moment.*] Will Margery *always* be as good as she is now, do you suppose ?

HYLTON [*unhesitatingly*]. I'll stake my life on it.

VERREKER [*eyebrows raised*]. No chance of her outgrowing it ?

HYLTON [*firmly*]. None !

VERREKER. Ah ! I hoped she might. . . . Well, Hylton, I'm glad to have had this chat with you. You really are a good chap, you know. And if you can go on being friends with a sweep like me I shall be grateful.

HYLTON [*smiling*]. I think I shall manage that.

VERREKER [*half to himself*]. I'm not so sure.

[*They stroll towards the door ; but before they have had time to reach it, MARGERY enters, and at once begins to scold them, in high good-humour.*]

MARGERY. You *rude* people ! You've stayed *much* too long over your cigars. How is poor William to clear away ?

VERREKER. Can't he do that to-morrow morning ?

MARGERY. That shows how much *you* know about managing a household !

HYLTON. We were just coming, Miss Denison.

MARGERY. You're too late now. Mother's gone to bed. She's tired. And Aunt Emily's going too. She's cross. And so am I. I'm offended.

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VERREKER. Stay five minutes. Sit down here.

MARGERY. No!

VERREKER. Yes. [Puts her gently in his own chair. He sits on an arm of arm-chair.] And give me a cigarette.

MARGERY. Ought you to smoke any more?

VERREKER. No. But I will. [Does so.

MARGERY [cheerfully]. I've been getting some more letters done for Mary Gamage.

VERREKER. That infernal orphan!

MARGERY. Sh! So you won't have *quite* seventy-five more to write.

VERREKER. Thank heaven!

MARGERY [gaily, quite blind to the enormity of the suggestion from VERREKER's point of view]. I think you might get up and do a few before breakfast to-morrow, just to show your gratitude. I'll help. I *should* like to get them all off before we go to the Vicarage.

VERREKER. Margery, I refuse!

MARGERY [unruffled]. Very well. But you're very foolish. Before breakfast is the nicest part of the day at this time of year. You lazy people who don't come down till half-past nine don't know what you're missing.

VERREKER. We'll take your word for it.

MARGERY [ignoring this sarcasm]. Will you come to tea at the Mackworths' on Friday, Mr. Hylton?

HYLTON. Certainly, if you like.

MARGERY. You must come too, Hugh.

VERREKER. All right. Who are the Mackworths?

MARGERY [seemingly unconscious of the appalling character of the programme]. They live in a funny

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little house in the village. Old Mrs. Mackworth's very deaf, and *he* can't hear much either, so they don't have many visitors. It's so tiring talking to deaf people, isn't it? One has to shout so. But I always try to go at least once when we're down here. It cheers them up, I think. I'm glad you're both coming. [VERREKER takes cigarette from between his lips and groans.] And now I really must go to bed. Good-night.

VERREKER [detaining her]. No. Stop a bit longer.

MARGERY [shaking her head with mock firmness]. Can't.

VERREKER. Yes, you can. Just till I've finished this. Besides, I've something rather particular to say to you.

HYLTON [rising]. In that case perhaps I'd better retire to the library?

VERREKER. Do. I'll be with you in two minutes.

[HYLTON goes out, and there is a brief silence. VERREKER is plunged in thought, and his brow puckers.]

MARGERY [merrily]. Well? What is this important thing you've got to say to me?

VERREKER. I'll tell you. [Pause. Looks at her fixedly for a moment or two]. By Jove, you are pretty, Margery.

MARGERY. I don't think that's very important.

VERREKER. Then you're very much mistaken! . . . However, that's not what I had to say. [Pause. He pulls himself together with an effort, and speaks gravely but kindly.] Margery, I want you to break off our engagement.

MARGERY [unable to believe her ears]. Hugh!

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VERREKER [gently]. My dear, I don't like saying it; and I hope you don't like hearing it—though I don't want it to hurt you too much either. But I've been thinking things over, and I'm quite sure we two oughtn't to marry.

MARGERY. Why not?

VERREKER. For lots of reasons. I'm not good enough for you, Margery, and that's the long and short of it.

MARGERY. What nonsense!

VERREKER. It's not nonsense at all, unfortunately. It's a painful truth. Mrs. Eversleigh was right. I ought never to have proposed to you.

MARGERY [sadly]. Do you mean you don't love me, Hugh, as you thought you did?

VERREKER. No. I don't mean that. I love you as much as ever, more perhaps now that I'm going to lose you. But on every ground except love I'm quite unfit to marry you.

MARGERY [pleading]. Surely love is enough?

VERREKER [*almost impatient at what he considers the colossal ineptitude of that remark*]. No. It isn't. Margery, let's face facts, and not shirk them as every one else seems to do. Marriage isn't a thing to be romantic about. It lasts too long.

MARGERY. Hugh!

VERREKER. My dear, it may last forty years. Surely that's long enough in all conscience. [*Recovering from his momentary irritability*]. Very well, then. As one marries for a long time one should choose carefully, reasonably. One mustn't be carried away by passion. Passion's a great thing in marriage, but common sense is a greater. Now what sort of a

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life should we make of it together if we married, you and I ? Why, my dear, we've not an idea or a taste in common. Everything you say makes me laugh, and almost everything I think would make you blush. It's simply absurd for a girl like you to marry a fellow like me. Let's say so frankly and end it.

MARGERY [*puzzled*]. But, Hugh, you *liked* being engaged to me at first, didn't you ? Why have you changed your mind ? Have *I* done anything ?

VERREKER. No, dear. You've been absolutely sweet and good, as you always would be. Only you're *too* good, and that's all about it.

MARGERY [*rather hurt*. *She is convinced that this must be one of HUGH's jokes, and she naturally thinks it rather heartless of him to joke at such a moment*]. Now you're laughing at me.

VERREKER [*absolutely serious*]. I never was further from laughter in my life. I say you're too good and I mean it. You look on life as a moral discipline. I look on it as a means to enjoyment. You think only of doing what you imagine to be right. I think only of getting what I know to be pleasant. [*With an ironical smile.*] They call it incompatibility of temper in the Law Courts, I believe.

MARGERY [*puzzled again*]. I don't understand you, Hugh. Sometimes you seem quite serious, and then you say something horrid that spoils it all.

VERREKER. I know, dear. You don't understand me, and it's just as well you don't. But that makes the idea of marriage between us rather ridiculous, doesn't it ? The sort of man you ought to marry is Hylton—who, by the way, is over head and ears

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in love with you. You should have heard his eulogies over you ten minutes ago. He was simply lyrical! Yes, you must marry Hylton. Will you?

MARGERY [*half laughing, half crying*]. I'm still engaged to you, dear, so far.

VERREKER [*briskly*]. I'll release you. And you really will be happy with Hylton. He's a first-rate chap. Promise me that when you've stopped mourning for me—say in about a fortnight's time—you'll seriously consider the possibilities of Hylton.

MARGERY [*more hurt and more puzzled than ever*]. Are you really heartless, Hugh, or do you only pretend to be?

VERREKER [*shrugging his shoulders*]. I don't know. Ask Hylton.

MARGERY [*sadly*]. I thought we'd been so happy together since we'd been engaged.

VERREKER [*heartily*]. So we have, dear—in spite of Mary Gamage. But then we've only been engaged a week. And I feel *years* older for it!

MARGERY [*asking the question in complete good faith*]. Seriously, Hugh?

VERREKER. I'm *serious* enough. [*But he uses the word in a different sense.*] You think everybody can be as self-denying as you are, Margery. You're wrong. Some people are born self-denying just as other people are born self-indulgent.

MARGERY [*encouragingly*]. But you may change.

VERREKER [*another moment of impatience*]. Men don't *change*, Margery. They *repent*, but they don't *reform*. [*The moment passes.*] And so our engagement has been a mistake. It's my fault, I know. I ought to have thought of all this before I

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asked you to marry me. But you were so pretty and—well, I didn't. Will you forgive me?

MARGERY [*gravely and a little sadly*]. Of course I forgive you, Hugh. It's not your fault. You thought you loved me and you asked me to marry you. Now you find you don't, and you ask me to release you. You've been quite kind and straightforward. There's nothing to forgive.

VERREKER [*with the nearest approach to emotion that he has allowed himself since the beginning of this scene*]. My dear, my dear, it's not that. I loved you before. I love you still. I believe I shall always love you—so long as I don't marry you. But married we should be miserable.

MARGERY [*gently*]. I don't think *I* should be miserable.

VERREKER [*briskly*]. I know *I* should. At first I should be as unselfish as the deuce just to oblige *you*. But after a bit I shouldn't be able to stand it, and I should strike. And then you'd be disappointed, and I should be disagreeable, and our marriage would become a tragedy. [*Sincerely.*] I don't want that to happen. I'd rather you found me out now while you're still fond of me than later when you had come to hate me.

MARGERY. I should never *hate* you, Hugh.

VERREKER. You couldn't help yourself, my dear. An unhappy marriage would demoralise even you. They say some forms of suffering ennoble people, and putting up with what one doesn't like is supposed to be good for the character—though I'm sure I don't know why. But an unhappy marriage never ennobled man or woman. It makes them

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peevish and unreasonable. It sours their tempers and ruins their digestions. *My parents didn't get on together, and I know.* If the parsons cared two straws about morality instead of thinking only of their dogmas, they'd make divorcing one's wife as easy as dismissing one's cook. Easier.

MARGERY. Hugh !

VERREKER. They would ! When married people don't hit it off, they jar. There's no middle course. And when the jarring has gone on for a certain length of time it gets past bearing. Human nerves won't stand it. Nothing will enable them to stand it. Not love, nor religion, nor all the seven deadly virtues. Socrates was a good man, but he made his wife pretty unhappy.

MARGERY [*the tears are dangerously near her eyes*]. And you think I should make you unhappy ?

VERREKER [*cheerfully*]. I'm sure of it. So let's behave accordingly. [*More gently. The danger of tears has been averted.*] Come, Margery, say you release me and get it over.

MARGERY [*slowly*]. Very well. If you really wish it . . . you're sure you *do* wish it ?

VERREKER. Quite. Thanks, dear. You've behaved like a trump, as you always do. And I think I must kiss you good-bye. [*Does so tenderly.*] Don't say anything to the others till after I've left. I rather dread Mrs. Eversleigh's unconcealed satisfaction. I shall go to-morrow.

MARGERY. Very well. If you'd rather not.

VERREKER [*looking at her half ironically*]. I'm afraid you think I've been a selfish beast about this ?

MARGERY [*wistfully*]. A little selfish, perhaps.

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VERREKER. You're wrong. For the first, and I hope the last, time in my life I've done an unselfish action. I'm a pauper, you know, and you're something of an heiress. And I've given you up without compensation. [Dispassionately.] It's rather to my credit.

MARGERY [sadly]. Only because you wouldn't be happy.

VERREKER. No. Because *you* wouldn't be happy. *I* should have been all right. But I had to put it the other way or you wouldn't have let me go. *I* should have given up philanthropy after the first six weeks and had no end of a good time. But *you'd* have been wretched. We've done the right thing. [Rising.] And you won't forget about Hylton, will you? Shall we go?

[He goes and opens the door for her. They go out as the curtain falls.]

THE CASSILIS ENGAGEMENT

A COMEDY FOR MOTHERS

CHARACTERS

MRS. CASSILIS.

GEOFFREY CASSILIS, *her son.*

LADY MARCHMONT, *her sister.*

THE COUNTESS OF REMENHAM.

MAJOR WARRINGTON, *her brother.*

LADY MABEL VENNING, *her daughter.*

MRS. BORRIDGE.

ETHEL BORRIDGE, *her daughter.*

THE REV. HILDEBRAND HERRIES, *the Rector.*

MRS. HERRIES, *his wife.*

WATSON, *butler at Deynham.*

DORSET, *Mrs. Cassilis's maid.*

TWO FOOTMEN.

The action of the play passes at Deynham Abbey, Mrs. Cassilis's house in Leicestershire, Act I in the Drawing-room, Act II on the Lawn, Act III in the Smoking-room, and Act IV in the Morning-room. One night passes between Acts I and II and between Acts III and IV, one week between Acts II and III.

NOTE.—The Leicestershire Cassilises pronounce their name as it is spelt.

THE CASSILIS ENGAGEMENT

ACT I

SCENE.—*The white drawing-room at Deynham Abbey, a very handsome room furnished in the Louis Seize style. There are big double doors at the back, and a large tea-table, with teacups, etc., on cloth, stands rather to the left of them. There is a large French window open on the left of the stage, with a sofa in front of it facing the view. On the opposite side of the room is the fireplace, but there is no fire as the month is August. Two or three arm-chairs stand near it. When the curtain rises the RECTOR is standing judicially on the hearthrug. He seems about to hum a tune, but thinks better of it. MRS. HERRIES is standing by the window. Presently she crosses to her husband, and sits in one of the arm-chairs. The RECTOR is a rubicund, humorous-looking man of fifty; his wife a prosperous-looking lady a few years younger.*

MRS. HERRIES. I wonder what can be keeping Mrs. Cassilis?

RECTOR [*back to fire*]. My dear, I told you we oughtn't to have called. On so sad an occasion—

MRS. HERRIES. My dear Hildebrand, it's just on

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these sad occasions that a visit is so consoling. One should always call after a birth, a funeral—

BUTLER [*showing in LADY REMENHAM and her daughter*]. I will tell Mrs. Cassilis you are here, my lady. She will be down in a moment.

LADY REMENHAM. Thank you. How do you do, Mrs. Herries ? How do you do, Rector ?

[LADY REMENHAM goes towards fireplace and shakes hands. She is a dignified old lady of about sixty. Her normal expression is one of placid self-assurance, but to-day she has the air of disapproving of something or somebody. MABEL is a very pretty girl of two and twenty. LADY REMENHAM seats herself comfortably by MRS. HERRIES. MABEL goes over to window, where the RECTOR joins her.]

MRS. HERRIES. How do you do, Lady Remenham ?

RECTOR. How do you do, Mabel ?

LADY REMENHAM. You've heard this dreadful news, haven't you ?

[RECTOR makes sympathetic gesture.

MRS. HERRIES. Yes. Poor Mrs. Cassilis.

LADY REMENHAM. Poor Adelaide, indeed ! That unhappy boy ! But there ! How any mother can allow such a thing to happen passes my comprehension. To get engaged !

RECTOR [*nods sympathetically*]. Just so.

LADY REMENHAM. Engagements are such troublesome things. They sometimes even lead to marriage. But we'll hope it won't be as bad as that in this case. You've not heard who she is, I suppose ?

MRS. HERRIES [*shaking her head mournfully*]. No.

LADY REMENHAM. Ah ! Some one quite

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impossible, of course. Otherwise Adelaide would have told me in her letter.

MRS. HERRIES. I'm afraid so.

LADY REMENHAM [*irritably*]. It's really extremely wicked of Geoffrey. And so silly, too!—which is worse. A temporary infatuation I could understand, terminated by some small monetary payment. It would have been regrettable, of course, but young men are like that. And Adelaide could have stopped it out of his allowance. But an engagement! I am quite shocked at her.

MABEL [*at window, turning to her mother*]. Don't you think, mamma, we might leave Mrs. Cassilis to manage her son's affairs her own way?

LADY REMENHAM. She has *not* managed them. That's exactly what I complain of. I can't altogether acquit the Rector of some blame in the matter. He was Geoffrey's tutor for years. They used to say in *my* young days, "Train up a child in the way he should go—"

RECTOR [*attempting a mild jest*]. And when he's grown up he'll give you a great deal of anxiety. So they did! So they did!

LADY REMENHAM [*severely*]. That is not the ending *I* remember.

RECTOR. That is the Revised Version.

[MRS. HERRIES *frowns*. *She feels this is not a moment for levity.*]

LADY REMENHAM. I dare say. They seem to alter everything nowadays. But, if so, I hardly see the use of education.

RECTOR [*obstinately cheerful*]. I have long been of that opinion, Lady Remenham.

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[MRS. CASSILIS, in a charming flutter of apologies, enters at this moment. She is a very pretty woman of forty, tall and graceful, and exquisitely dressed.]

MRS. CASSILIS. You must forgive me all of you. I had some letters to finish. [General handshake. Kiss to MABEL.] Dear Mabel. How do you do, Mrs. Herries ?

RECTOR. How do you do, Mrs. Cassilis ?

LADY REMENHAM. My dear Adelaide, what a charming gown ! But you always do have the most delightful clothes. Where do you get them ?

MRS. CASSILIS. Clarice made this.

[Two footmen bring the tea-table down into the middle of the room. The BUTLER, who has brought in a teapot on a salver, places it on the table, and brings up a chair for MRS. CASSILIS. The footmen go out.]

LADY REMENHAM. Clarice ? The wretch ! She always makes my things atrociously. If only I had your figure !

MRS. CASSILIS. Excuse me, dear. [To BUTLER.] The carriage has gone to the station to meet Lady Marchmont, Watson ?

BUTLER. Yes, madam. It started five minutes ago. [Exit BUTLER.]

MRS. CASSILIS [to LADY REMENHAM]. I'm so glad you like it. [Goes to tea-table and seats herself.]

LADY REMENHAM. Is Margaret coming to stay with you ?

MRS. CASSILIS. Yes, for ten days.

LADY REMENHAM [drawing chair up to table]. And now will you please pour out my tea ? I have

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come here to scold you, and I shall require several cups.

MRS. CASSILIS [*quite cheerful*]. To scold me? Won't you all bring your chairs to the table? [*They all do so.*] Rector, where are you? [To LADY REMENHAM.] Cream?

LADY REMENHAM. Thank you. And a small lump.

MRS. CASSILIS. And why am I to be scolded?

LADY REMENHAM. You know quite well. [*Sternly.*] Adelaide, what is this I hear about Geoffrey's engagement?

MRS. CASSILIS [*not at all disturbed*]. Oh, that? Yes, Geoffrey has got engaged to a girl in London. Isn't it *romantic* of him! I know nothing whatever about her except that I believe she has no money, and Geoffrey is over head and ears in love with her.

MRS. HERRIES [*blandly*]. My dear Mrs. Cassilis, I should have thought *that* was quite enough!

MRS. CASSILIS. Rector, will you cut that cake? It's just by your hand.

LADY REMENHAM [*refusing to be diverted from the task of cross-examination*]. Where did he meet her?

MRS. CASSILIS. In an omnibus, I understand.

LADY REMENHAM [*scandalised*]. An omnibus!

MRS. CASSILIS. Yes. That was so *romantic*, too! One of the horses fell down, and she was frightened. They thought she was going to faint. Geoffrey got her out, took charge of her, discovered her address, and took her home. Wasn't it *clever* of him? Of course she asked him to come in. He was introduced to her mother. And now they're engaged.

[*Gives cup to Rector.*

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LADY REMENHAM [*with awful dignity*]. And what is the name of this young person ?

MRS. CASSILIS. Borridge.

LADY REMENHAM. Borridge ! Mabel, my love, pray remember if ever you come home and inform me that you are engaged to a person of the name of Borridge I shall whip you. [Puts down cup.]

MABEL. Very well, mamma.

MRS. CASSILIS. Another cup ?

LADY REMENHAM. Thank you. Rather less sugar this time. [Gives cup.] I never could understand why you let Geoffrey be in London at all. Alone too. Young men ought never to be allowed out alone at his age. They are so susceptible.

MABEL. Geoffrey has his profession, mamma.

MRS. CASSILIS. Geoffrey's at the Bar, you know.

LADY REMENHAM. The Bar ! What business has Geoffrey to be at the Bar ! Deynham has the best shooting in the Shires, and in the winter there's the hunting. What more does he want ? It's disgraceful.

RECTOR [*another mild effort at humour*]. My dear Lady Remenham, you're sure you're not confusing the *Bar* with the *Dock* ?

MRS. HERRIES. Hildebrand !

LADY REMENHAM [*impatiently*]. The Bar is a good enough profession, of course. But only for *very* younger sons. Geoffrey will have Deynham some day, and twelve thousand a year. I don't think Adelaide need have made a little attorney of him.

MRS. CASSILIS. Young men must do *something*, don't you think ?

LADY REMENHAM [*briskly*]. Certainly not ! It's

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this vulgar Radical notion that people ought to *do* things that is ruining English Society. What did Mr. Borridge *do*, by the way ?

MRS. CASSILIS [*hesitates*]. He was a bookmaker, I believe.

LADY REMENHAM [*triumphantly*]. There, you see ! That's what comes of *doing* things !

MRS. CASSILIS [*slight shrug. Pouring herself out more tea, and still quite unruffled*]. Well, I'm afraid there's no use in discussing it. They're engaged, and Miss Borridge is coming down here.

MRS. HERRIES. Coming here !

LADY REMENHAM. Coming here !!!

MRS. CASSILIS. Yes. On a visit. With her mother.

LADY REMENHAM [*putting down her cup with a touch of solemnity*]. Adelaide, are you—excuse my asking the question—are you *quite* in your right mind ?

MRS. CASSILIS [*laughing*]. I believe so.

LADY REMENHAM. You've noticed nothing ? No dizziness about the head ? No singing in the ears ? [MRS. CASSILIS *shakes her head*.] And yet you ask this young woman to stay with you ! *And* her mother ! Neither of whom you know anything whatever about !

MRS. CASSILIS. Another cup ?

[LADY REMENHAM *shakes her head irritably*.]

LADY REMENHAM. Is Mr. Borridge—Ugh !—coming too ?

MRS. CASSILIS. He is dead, I believe.

LADY REMENHAM. That, at least, is satisfactory.

MABEL. Mamma !

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LADY REMENHAM. Mabel, I shall do my duty whatever happens. [Turning to MRS. CASSILIS again.] And does Mrs. Borridge carry on the business? I think you said he was a *boot-maker*?

MABEL. *Book-maker*.

MRS. CASSILIS [refusing to take offence] No. I believe he left her some small annuity.

LADY REMENHAM. Annuity? Ah, dies with her, of course?

MRS. CASSILIS. No doubt.

LADY REMENHAM [gasps]. Well, Adelaide, I never should have believed it of you. To ask these people to the house!

MRS. CASSILIS. Why shouldn't I ask them? Geoffrey tells me Ethel is charming.

LADY REMENHAM. Ethel?

MRS. CASSILIS. Miss Borridge.

LADY REMENHAM. Bah!

[Enter BUTLER, showing in another visitor. This is LADY MARCHMONT, MRS. CASSILIS's sister. She is a woman of about five-and-forty. She wears a light travelling cloak. She is not unlike MRS. CASSILIS in appearance and manner, but is of a more delicate, fragile type.]

BUTLER. Lady Marchmont.

MRS. CASSILIS [rising]. Ah, Margaret. How glad I am to see you. Some more tea, Watson.

LADY MARCHMONT [kisses her]. Not for me, please. No, really. My doctor won't *hear* of it. Hot water with a little milk is the most he allows me. How do you do, dear? [Shaking hands with the others.] How do you do? How do you do?

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[BUTLER goes out.]

MRS. CASSILIS. How's the General?

LADY MARCHMONT. Very gouty. His temper this morning was atrocious, poor man.

LADY REMENHAM [*shakes her head*]. You bear it like a saint, dear.

LADY MARCHMONT [*philosophically, sitting in arm-chair after laying aside her cloak*]. Yes—I go away a good deal. He finds my absence very soothing. That's why I was so glad to accept Adelaide's invitation when she asked me.

MRS. CASSILIS. My dear, you'll be invaluable. I look to you to help me with my visitors.

LADY REMENHAM. Poor Margaret. But you always were so unselfish.

LADY MARCHMONT. Are they *very*—?

LADY REMENHAM. *Very*.

MRS. CASSILIS [*laughing*]. My dear, Lady Remenham knows nothing whatever about them.

LADY REMENHAM [*firmly*]. I know everything about them. The girl has no money. She has no position. She became engaged to Geoffrey without your knowledge. She has a perfectly dreadful mother. And her name is Borridge.

LADY MARCHMONT [*raising her brows*]. When are they coming?

MRS. CASSILIS. I expect them in half an hour. The carriage was to go straight back to the station to meet them.

LADY REMENHAM [*ruffling her feathers angrily*]. I hope Geoffrey is conscious of the folly and wickedness of his conduct.

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LADY MARCHMONT. Where is he, dear ?

MRS. CASSILIS. He's down here with me—and as happy as possible, I'm glad to say.

LADY REMENHAM. Extraordinary ! But the young men of the present day *are* extraordinary. Young men nowadays seem always to be either irreclaimably vicious or deplorably silly. I prefer them vicious. They give less trouble. My poor brother Algernon—you remember Algernon, don't you, Rector ? He was another of your pupils.

RECTOR [*sighs*]. Yes, I remember.

MRS. HERRIES. Major Warrington hasn't been down for quite a long time, has he ?

LADY REMENHAM. No. We don't ask him to Milverton now. He comes to us in London, but in the country one has to be more particular. He really is dreadfully dissipated. Always running after some petticoat or other. Often more than one. But there is safety in numbers, don't you think ?

RECTOR. Unquestionably.

LADY REMENHAM. Algernon always says he is *by* temperament a polygamist. I don't know what he means. However, I've no anxiety about *him*. *He never* gets engaged. He's far too *clever* for that. I wonder if he could help you out of this dreadful entanglement ? In a case of this kind one should have the very best advice.

MRS. CASSILIS [*laughing*]. I shall be delighted to see Major Warrington—though not for the reason you suggest.

LADY REMENHAM. Well, I'll ask him down. Remenham won't like it. He disapproves of him so much. He gets quite virtuous about it. But

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that sort of moral indignation should never be allowed to get out of hand, should it? [RECTOR nods.] Besides, he's away just now. I'll write to Algernon directly I get back, and I'll bring him over to dinner one day next week. Say Thursday?

LADY MARCHMONT. Do, dear. I adore Major Warrington.

LADY REMENHAM. I dare say. [Preparing to go.] He's not *your* brother. Meantime, I can ask him whether he knows anything against Mrs. Borridge. But he's sure to. He knows nearly all the detrimental people in London, especially if their daughters are in the least attractive.

MRS. CASSILIS [smiling]. You'll come with him on Thursday, won't you? And Mabel?

[MABEL rises.]

LADY REMENHAM. Perhaps that will be best. Then I can keep my brother within bounds. Poor Algernon is apt to take too much champagne unless I am there to prevent him. And now, dear, I really must go. [She and MABEL go up towards door.] Good-bye.

MRS. CASSILIS. You won't stay to meet Mrs. Borridge?

LADY REMENHAM [shudders]. I think not. Thursday will be *quite* soon enough. Good-bye, Mrs. Herries. [As they reach door GEOFFREY opens it, and almost runs into her arms.] Ah, here is the young man who is causing us all this distress.

GEOFFREY. I, Lady Remenham? [Shakes hands.] How do you do, Aunt Margaret?

[Shakes hands with others.]

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LADY REMENHAM [*shakes hands*]. You. What do you *mean* by getting engaged to some one we none of us know anything about?

MABEL. Mamma!

LADY REMENHAM. I consider your conduct perfectly heartless. Its foolishness needs no comment from me.

GEOFFREY. Really, Lady Remenham—

LADY REMENHAM. Tut, tut, sir. Don't "really" me. I'm ashamed of you. And now I'll be off before I quarrel with you. Come, Mabel.

[*Sweeps out, followed by MABEL. GEOFFREY opens door for them, and then takes them down to their carriage.*]

MRS. HERRIES. I think we ought to be going, too. Come, Hildebrand. [Shakes hands.]

[MRS. CASSILIS *rings*.]

RECTOR. Good-bye, Mrs. Cassilis. Let's hope everything will turn out for the best.

MRS. HERRIES. It never does. Good-bye.

MRS. CASSILIS [*going towards door with RECTOR*]. Good-bye. [Shakes hands warmly.] And you'll both come and dine on Thursday, won't you? To-morrow week that is. Major Warrington will want to see his old tutor.

RECTOR. You're very good.

[*He and Mrs. HERRIES go out.*]

MRS. CASSILIS [*returning to her sister*]. Dear Lady Remenham! What nonsense she talks.

LADY MARCHMONT. People who talk as much as that must talk a good deal of nonsense, mustn't they? Otherwise they have nothing to say.

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[*Re-enter GEOFFREY.*]

GEOFFREY. Lady Remenham seems ruffled.

LADY MARCHMONT. About your engagement? I'm not surprised.

GEOFFREY. I don't see what it's got to do with her.

LADY MARCHMONT. You must make allowance for a mother's feelings, my dear Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY [*pats Mrs. Cassilis's hand, then goes to tea-table and helps himself to tea.*]. Lady Remenham isn't my mother. She's my god-mother.

LADY MARCHMONT. She's Mabel's mother.

MRS. CASSILIS. Sh! Margaret.

LADY MARCHMONT. My dear, there's no use making mysteries about things. Geoffrey was always supposed to be going to marry Mabel ever since they were children. He knows that.

GEOFFREY. That was only boy and girl talk.

LADY MARCHMONT. For you, perhaps.

GEOFFREY. And for her. Mabel never expected—

[*Pause. He thinks.*]

LADY MARCHMONT. Did you ever ask her?

GEOFFREY. But I never supposed—

LADY MARCHMONT. I think you *should* have supposed. A boy should be very careful how he encourages a girl to think of him in that way.

GEOFFREY. But I'd no idea. Of course, I *like* Mabel. I like her awfully. We're like brother and sister. But beyond that—

[*Pause.*]

Mother, do you think I've behaved badly to Mabel?

MRS. CASSILIS [*gently*]. I think perhaps you've a little disappointed her.

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GEOFFREY [*peevishly*]. Why didn't somebody tell me? How was I to know?

LADY MARCHMONT. My dear boy, we couldn't be expected to know you were absolutely blind.

MRS. CASSILIS. Margaret, you're not to scold Geoffrey. I won't allow it.

GEOFFREY. Mother, dear—you won't allow this to make any difference? With Ethel, I mean?

MRS. CASSILIS. Of course not, Geoff.

[*Lays hand on his*.]

GEOFFREY [*earnestly*]. She's so fond of me. And I'm so fond of her. We were made for each other. I couldn't bear it if you were unkind to her.

MRS. CASSILIS. My dear Geoff, I'm sure Ethel is everything that is sweet and good, or my boy wouldn't love her. And I intend to fall in love with her myself directly I set eyes on her.

GEOFFREY. Dear mother! [*Pats her hand affectionately. Pause; then, thoughtfully.*] I'm afraid you'll find her mother rather trying—at first. She's not quite a lady, you know. . . . But she's very good-natured.

MRS. CASSILIS [*cheerfully*]. Well, well, we shall see. And now run away, dear, and leave me to talk to Margaret, and I'll undertake that all symptoms of crossness shall have disappeared before our visitors arrive.

GEOFFREY. All right, mother.

[*Kisses her and goes out.*]

LADY MARCHMONT [*looking after him reflectively*]. How you spoil that boy!

MRS. CASSILIS [*lightly*]. What else should I do with him? He's my only one. Mothers always

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spoil their sons, don't they? And quarrel with their daughters. More marriages are due to girls being unhappy at home than most people imagine.

LADY MARCHMONT. And yet Geoffrey wants to leave you, apparently.

MRS. CASSILIS [smiling bravely; but her eyes have a suspicion of moisture in them]. Evidently I didn't spoil him enough.

LADY MARCHMONT [washing her hands of the whole affair]. Well, I'm glad you're pleased with this engagement.

MRS. CASSILIS [sudden change of manner. Her face loses its brightness, and she suddenly seems to look older]. Pleased with it! Do you really believe that?

LADY MARCHMONT. Didn't you say so?

MRS. CASSILIS [shrugs]. To Lady Remenham and Mrs. Herries. Yes.

LADY MARCHMONT. And to Geoffrey.

MRS. CASSILIS. And Geoffrey too. [Half to herself]. Mothers can't always be straightforward with their sons, can they?

LADY MARCHMONT. Why not?

[There is a pause while Mrs. CASSILIS makes up her mind whether to answer this or not. Then she seems to decide to speak out. She moves nearer to her sister, and when she begins her voice is very firm and matter-of-fact.]

MRS. CASSILIS. My dear Margaret, what would you do if your son suddenly wrote to you that he had become engaged to a girl you knew nothing whatever about, a girl far beneath him in social rank?

LADY MARCHMONT [firmly]. I should have forbidden the engagement. Forbidden it absolutely.

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MRS. CASSILIS. Without seeing the girl?

LADY MARCHMONT. Certainly. The mere fact of her accepting my son before I had ever set eyes on her would have been quite enough.

MRS. CASSILIS. But supposing your son were of age and independent?

LADY MARCHMONT [*impatiently*]. Geoffrey isn't independent.

MRS. CASSILIS. He has five hundred a year.

LADY MARCHMONT [*contemptuously*]. What's that?

MRS. CASSILIS. Besides, Geoffrey knows I should always be willing to help him.

LADY MARCHMONT. That's just it. He ought *not* to have known. You ought to have made it clear to him from the first that if he married without your consent he would never have a penny from you, either now or at your death. Deynham isn't entailed, fortunately.

MRS. CASSILIS. But, my dear, I couldn't *disinherit* Geoffrey! How could I?

LADY MARCHMONT [*shrugs*]. You could have threatened to. And then the girl wouldn't have accepted him.

MRS. CASSILIS. I don't know. [*Thoughtfully*.] Five hundred a year may seem a considerable sum to her.

LADY MARCHMONT [*horrified*]. Is it as bad as that?

MRS. CASSILIS [*trying to smile*]. Besides, she may be really in love with him.

LADY MARCHMONT [*snappish*]. What *has* that to do with it?

MRS. CASSILIS. Young people. In love. They are seldom prudent, are they?

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LADY MARCHMONT. Still, I should have forbidden the engagement.

MRS. CASSILIS. And then?

LADY MARCHMONT. What do you mean?

MRS. CASSILIS. If Geoffrey had defied me? Boys can be very obstinate.

LADY MARCHMONT. I should have refused ever to see him again.

MRS. CASSILIS. Ah, Margaret, I couldn't do that. Geoffrey is everything I have. He is my only son, my joy and my pride. I couldn't quarrel with him whatever happened. [LADY MARCHMONT *leans back with gesture of impatience.*] No, Margaret, my plan was the best.

LADY MARCHMONT. What *is* your plan?

MRS. CASSILIS [*quite practical*]. My plan is to give the thing a fair trial. Ask her down here. Ask her mother down here. And see what happens.

LADY MARCHMONT [*looking at her narrowly*]. Nothing else?

MRS. CASSILIS. Nothing else—at present.

LADY MARCHMONT. You could have done that without sanctioning the engagement.

MRS. CASSILIS. Yes. But love thrives on opposition. There's a fascination about a runaway match. It has romance. Whereas there's no romance at all about an ordinary wedding. It's only dull and rather vulgar. [*Wearily.*] And, after all, the girl *may* be presentable.

LADY MARCHMONT. Borridge! [*Crisply.*] I'm not very sanguine about *that*.

MRS. CASSILIS. Anyhow, she's pretty, and Geoffrey loves her. That's all we know about her at present.

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LADY MARCHMONT. Wretched boy. To think he should have allowed himself to be caught in this way! . . . Don't you think you might have asked the daughter *without* the mother?

MRS. CASSILIS. So Geoffrey suggested. He seemed rather nervous about having her here. She's rather a terrible person, I gather. But I said as we were marrying into the family we mustn't be unkind to her. [With a slow smile.] Poor boy, he rather blenched at that. I think he hadn't associated Mrs. Borridge with his matrimonial schemes. It's just as well he should do so at once, don't you think?

BUTLER. Mrs. and Miss Borridge.

[Enter Mrs. BORRIDGE and ETHEL. Both rise. LADY MARCHMONT turns sharp round to look at the newcomers. MRS. CASSILIS goes up to meet them with her sweetest smile. Nothing could be more hospitable than her manner or more gracious than her welcome. The change from the MRS. CASSILIS of a moment before, with the resolute set of the lips and the glitter in the eyes, to this gentle, caressing creature does the greatest credit to her powers of self-control. LADY MARCHMONT notices it, and is a little shocked.]

MRS. CASSILIS. How do you do? How do you do, my dear? [Kisses ETHEL.] Tell Mr. Geoffrey, Watson. I hope you've not had a tiring journey, Mrs. Borridge?

[Exit BUTLER.]

MRS. BORRIDGE. Not at all, Mrs. Cassilis. We 'ad—had—the compartment to ourselves, bein' first-class. As I says to my girlie, "They'll very likely

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send the carriage to meet us, and it looks better for the servants."

[MRS. BORRIDGE comes down stage. She is a large, gross woman, rather over-dressed in inexpensive materials. Too much colour in her hat and far too much in her cheeks. But a beaming, good-natured harridan for all that. As a landlady you would rather like her. She smiles nervously in LADY MARCHMONT's direction, not sure whether she ought to say anything or wait to be introduced. Her daughter keeps by her side, watching to see she doesn't commit herself, and quite sure that she will. ETHEL is pretty but second-rate; she has had the sense to dress simply, and therefore is less appallingly out of the picture than her far more amiable mother.]

MRS. CASSILIS. Let me introduce you. Mrs. Borridge—Lady Marchmont, Miss Borridge.

[LADY MARCHMONT bows]

MRS. BORRIDGE [extends gloved hand]. How do you do, Lady Marchmont? Proud, I'm sure.

[LADY MARCHMONT finds nothing to say, and for the moment there is a constrained pause. Then enter GEOFFREY hurriedly.]

GEOFFREY [with as much heartiness as he can muster, but it rings a little hollow]. How do you do, Mrs. Borridge? Ethel, dear, how long have you been here? I didn't hear you come. [Kisses her.

ETHEL. We've only just got here.

MRS. BORRIDGE [subsiding into an arm-chair]. Don't apologise, Geoffy. Your ma's been entertaining us most kind.

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GEOFFREY [*with look of gratitude to Mrs. Cassilis*]. Dear mother.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Well, how *are* you, Geoffy ? You *look* first-rate.

GEOFFREY. Oh, I'm all right.

MRS. BORRIDGE. And what a fine 'ouse—house—you've got ! Quite a palace, I declare !

GEOFFREY. I'm glad you like it.

MRS. BORRIDGE. And it'll all be yours some day. Won't it ?

ETHEL [*pulls her sleeve*]. Mother !

GEOFFREY. That's as my mother decides.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Then you're sure to 'ave it. I know what mothers are ! And what a 'andsome room, too. Quite like the Metropole at Brighton.

[Enter Mrs. Cassilis's maid. *She is in a perfectly plain black dress, and looks enormously more like a lady than Ethel.*]

MAID. Can I have your keys, madam ?

MRS. BORRIDGE [*surprised*]. My keys ?

MAID. The keys of your trunks, madam.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Certainly not. Who ever 'card of such a thing ?

MAID. I thought you might wish me to unpack for you, madam.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*bristling*]. Oh. *Did* you ! I don't want no strange girls ferriting in *my* boxes. [ETHEL nudges her arm.] What *is* it, Eth ? Oh, very well. But I'm not going to let her, all the same. No, thank you.

MRS. CASSILIS [*quite self-possessed. Lady Marchmont nervously avoids her eye*]. Mrs. Borridge will

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unpack for herself, Dorset. [MAID bows, and turns to go out.] Wait a moment. [MAID pauses at door.] Would you like to take off your things at once, Mrs. Borridge ? If so, Dorset shall show you your room. And I'll have some tea sent up to you there. You'll want it after your journey. [Feels teapot.] This is quite cold. What do you say, Ethel ?

ETHEL. Thank you, Mrs. Cassilis. A cup of tea would be very nice.

MRS. CASSILIS. Show Mrs. Borridge her room, Dorset. [MRS. BORRIDGE rises.] And take her up some tea. Dinner will be at eight. You'll ring if there's anything you want, won't you ?

MRS. BORRIDGE. Thank you, Mrs. Cassilis.

[MRS. BORRIDGE waddles out, beaming. She feels that her first introduction to the houses of the great has gone off successfully. GEOFFREY holds the door open for them, and gives ETHEL a sly kiss in passing. MRS. CASSILIS makes no sign, but one can feel her shudder at the sound. GEOFFREY comes down to her a moment later, brimming with enthusiasm.]

GEOFFREY. Well, mother, what do you think of her ? Isn't she sweet ?

MRS. CASSILIS [gently]. She's very pretty, Geoff. [Lays hand on his.

GEOFFREY. And good ! You don't know how good she is !

MRS. CASSILIS. So long as she's good to my boy that's all I ask.

GEOFFREY. Dearest mother. [Kisses her demonstratively.] Now I'll go and dress.

[Goes out quickly, with a boyish feeling that he has

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been rather too demonstrative for a true-born Englishman. There is a long pause, during which LADY MARCHMONT looks at her sister, MRS. CASSILIS at nothing. The latter is evidently in deep thought, and seems to have almost forgotten her sister's presence. At last LADY MARCHMONT speaks with the stern accent of "I told you so."]

LADY MARCHMONT. And that's the girl your son is to marry.

MRS. CASSILIS. Marry her ! Nonsense, my dear Margaret.

[*The curtain falls*]

ACT II

SCENE.—*The lawn at Deynham. Time, after breakfast the following morning. Under a tree stand two or three long wicker chairs, with bright red cushions. On the right stands the house, with windows open on to the terrace. A path on the left leads to the flower garden, and another on the same side to the strawberry beds. When the curtain rises, Mrs. CASSILIS comes on to the terrace, followed by ETHEL, and a little later by Mrs. BORRIDGE. The last-named is flushed with food, and gorgeously arrayed in a green silk blouse. She is obviously in the best of spirits, and is generally terribly at ease in Zion.*

MRS. CASSILIS. Shall we come out on the lawn ? It's such a perfect morning.

ETHEL. That will be jolly, Mrs. Cassilis. [They come down.] When I'm in the country I shall always eat too much breakfast and then spend the morning on a long chair digesting it. So will mother.

MRS. BORRIDGE. How you go on, dearie !

MRS. CASSILIS. Try this chair, then. [Slightly moving long chair forward.] Mrs. Borridge, what kind of chair do you like ?

MRS. BORRIDGE. This'll do. I'm not particular. [Subsides into another long chair.] Am I showing my ankles, Eth ?

ETHEL. Sh ! mother !

[Giggles.

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MRS. BORRIDGE. Well, I only asked, dearie.

MRS. CASSILIS. I wonder if you'd like a cushion for your head? Try this.

[*Puts vivid red cushion behind Mrs. BORRIDGE's vivid green blouse. The effect is electrifying.*]

MRS. BORRIDGE. That's better.

[*MRS. CASSILIS sinks negligently in wicker chair and puts up white lace parasol.*]

ETHEL [*sigh of content*]. I call this Heaven, Mrs. Cassilis.

MRS. CASSILIS. That's right, my dear. Are you fond of the country?

ETHEL. I don't know. I've never been there so far. Not to the real country, I mean. Mums and I have a week at Brighton now and then. And once we went for a month to Broadstairs after I had the measles. But that's not exactly country, is it?

MRS. CASSILIS. You're sure to like it. Geoffrey loves it. He's never so happy as when he's pottering about Deynham with his gun.

ETHEL. Doesn't he get tired of that?

MRS. CASSILIS. Oh no. Besides, he doesn't do that all the year round. He rides a great deal. We've very good hunting at Deynham. Are you fond of horses?

ETHEL. I can't bear them, Mrs. Cassilis.

MRS. BORRIDGE. When she was a little tot her father put 'er—her—on a pony and she fell off. It didn't hurt 'er, but the doctor said 'er nerve was shook. And now she can't bear 'orses.

MRS. CASSILIS. What a pity! I do hope you

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won't be dull while you're with us. Perhaps you're fond of walking ?

ETHEL. Yes. I don't mind walking—for a little. If there's anything to walk *to*.

MRS. CASSILIS. We often walk up Milverton Hill on fine afternoons to see the view. It's the highest point about here.

ETHEL [*stifling a yawn*]. Is it, Mrs. Cassilis ?

MRS. CASSILIS. And no doubt we shall find other things to amuse you. What *do* you like ?

ETHEL. Oh, shops and theatres, and lunching at restaurants and dancing, and, oh, lots of things.

MRS. CASSILIS. I'm afraid we've no shops nearer than Leicester, and that's twelve miles away. And we've no restaurants at all. But I dare say we could get up a dance for you.

ETHEL [*clapping her hands*]. That'll be *sweet* ! I simply *love* dancing. And all the rest of the time I shall sit on the lawn and grow fat, like mummy. [Protest from MRS. BORRIDGE.] Oh yes, I shall.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Ethel, don't be saucy.

ETHEL [*laughing*]. Mummy, if you scold me you'll have to go in. It's far too hot to be scolded.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Isn't she a spoilt girl, Mrs. Cassilis ? What they taught you at that boarding school, miss, *I* don't know. Not manners, *I* can see.

ETHEL [*ruffling her mother's wig*]. There ! there ! mums. Was 'em's cross ?

MRS. BORRIDGE [*pettishly*]. Stop it, Ethel, stop it, I say. Whatever will Mrs. Cassilis think of you !

MRS. CASSILIS [*smiling sweetly*]. Don't scold her, Mrs. Borridge. It's so pleasant to see a little high spirits, isn't it ?

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MRS. BORRIDGE [*beaming*]. Well, if *you* don't mind, Mrs. Cassilis, *I* don't. But it's not the way girls were taught to behave in *my* young days.

ETHEL [*slight yawn*]. That was so long ago, mums !

MRS. CASSILIS [*rising*]. Well, I must go and see after my housekeeping. Can you entertain each other while I'm away for a little ? My sister will be down soon, I hope. She had breakfast in her room. And Geoffrey will be back in half an hour. I asked him to ride over to Milverton for me with a note.

ETHEL. We shall be all right, Mrs. Cassilis. Mother'll go to sleep. She always does if you make her too comfortable. And then she'll snore, won't you, mums ?

[MRS. CASSILIS goes into the house, smiling bravely to the last.]

MRS. BORRIDGE [*alarmed*]. Ethel, you shouldn't talk like that before Mrs. Cassilis. She won't like it.

ETHEL. Oh yes, she will. And I'm going to make her like *me* awfully. What lovely clothes she has ! I wish *you* had lovely clothes, mums.

MRS. BORRIDGE. What's the matter with my clothes, dearie ? I 'ad on my best silk last night. And I bought this blouse special in the Grove only a week ago so as to do you credit.

ETHEL. I know. Still . . . Couldn't you have chosen something *quieter* ?

MRS. BORRIDGE. Oh no, dearie. I 'ate quiet things.

ETHEL. Hate, mother.

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MRS. BORRIDGE. Hate, then. Give me something cheerful.

ETHEL [*hopelessly*]. Very well, mummy.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*imploring*]. But *do* be careful what you say before Mrs. Cassilis. She's not used to girls being so free.

ETHEL. Oh yes, she is, mums. All girls are like that nowadays. All girls that are ladies, I mean. They bet, and talk slang, and smoke cigarettes, and play bridge. I know all about that. I've read about it in "The Ladies' Mail." One of them put ice down her young man's back at dinner, and when he broke off his engagement she only laughed.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*lamentably*]. Oh dear, I do hope there won't be ice for dinner to-night.

ETHEL [*laughing*]. Poor mums, don't be anxious. I'll be *very* careful, I promise you.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*complaining*]. You're so'eadstrong. And I *do* want to see you married and respectable. I wasn't always respectable myself, and I know what it means for a girl. Your sister Nan, she's gay, she is. She 'adn't no ambition. An' look what she is now!

ETHEL [*looking round nervously*]. If Geoff were to hear of it!

MRS. BORRIDGE. 'E won't. Not 'e! I've seen to that.

ETHEL. These things always get known somehow.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Nan's changed 'er name. Calls 'erself Mrs. Seymour. An' she never comes to see us now. If she did, I'd show 'er the door fast enough. Disgracin' us like that!

ETHEL. Poor Nan!

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MRS. BORRIDGE [*warmly*]. Don't you pity 'er. She don't deserve it. She treated us like dirt. She's a bad 'un all through. I've done things myself as I didn't ought to 'ave done. But I've always wanted to be respectable. But it's not so easy when you've your living to make and no one to look to. [ETHEL *nods*.] Yes, I've 'ad my bad times, dearie. But I've pulled through them. And I *made* your father marry me. No one can deny that. It wasn't easy. An' I had to give him all my savings before 'e'd say "Yes." And even then I wasn't 'appy till we'd been to church. But 'e did marry me in the end. An' then *you* was born, an' I says my girl shall be brought up respectable. She shall be a lady. And some day, when she's married an' ridin' in her carriage, she'll say, "It's all mother's doing."

[*Wipes her eyes in pensive melancholy.*]

ETHEL. How long *were* you married to father, mums?

MRS. BORRIDGE. Only eight years, dearie. Before that I was 'is 'ousekeeper.

ETHEL. *His*, mummy.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Very well, dearie. [*With quiet satisfaction.*] Father drank 'issel to death the year Bend Or won the Derby. [*Shaking her head.*] He lost a pot o' money over that, and it preyed on 'is mind. So he took to the drink. If he 'adn't insured 'is life an' kep' the premiums paid we should 'ave been in the 'ouse, that's where we should 'ave been, dearie.

ETHEL. Poor dad!

MRS. BORRIDGE. Yes. 'E 'ad 'is faults. But 'e was a kind-'earted man, was Joe Borridge. 'E died much respected. [*Cheering up.*] An' now you're

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engaged to a *real* gentleman ! That's the sort for my Eth !

ETHEL. Oh ! sh ! mums. [Looking round nervously.]

MRS. BORRIDGE. No one'll hear. And if they do, what's the harm ? You've got 'is promise.

ETHEL. His, mother.

MRS. BORRIDGE. You can hold 'im—him—to it.

ETHEL [nodding]. Yes. Besides, Geoff's awfully in love with me. And I really rather like *him*, you know—in a way.

MRS. BORRIDGE. I know, dearie. Still, I'd get something from 'im on paper if I was you, something that'll 'old 'im. The men takes a bit of 'olding nowadays. They're that slippy ! You get something that'll 'old 'em. That's what I always say to girls. Letters is best. Oh, the chances I've seen missed through not gettin' something on paper !

ETHEL [confidently]. You needn't worry, mummy. Geoff's all right.

MRS. BORRIDGE. I dare say. Still, I'd like something the lawyers can take hold of. Geoffy may get tired of *you*, dearie. Men are that changeable. I know them !

ETHEL [viciously]. He'd better not ! I'd make him *pay* for it !

MRS. BORRIDGE. So you could, dearie, if you 'ad somethin' on paper. [ETHEL shrugs impatiently.] Well, if you won't, you won't. But if anythin' happens don't say I didn't warn you, that's all. I wish Geoffy was a lord, like Lord Buckfastleigh.

ETHEL. I don't.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Well, not *just* like Buckfastleigh, per'aps. But still, a lord. You never did like Buckfastleigh.

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ETHEL. That old beast !

MRS. BORRIDGE [*remonstrating*]. He's been a good friend to us, dearie. And he is an earl, whatever you may say.

ETHEL. Pah !

MRS. BORRIDGE. And he's rich. Richer than Geoffy. And he's awfully sweet on you, dearie. I believe he'd 'ave married you if 'is old woman 'ad turned up 'er toes last autumn. And he's seventy-three. He wouldn't 'ave lasted long.

ETHEL [*fiercely*]. I wouldn't marry him if he were twice as rich—and twice as old.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*placidly*]. I dare say you're right, dearie. He's a queer 'un is Buckfastleigh. But he offered to settle five thousand down if you'd go to Paris with 'im. Five thousand down on the nail. He wasn't what you'd call sober when he said it, but he meant it. I dare say he'd 'ave made it seven if you hadn't boxed 'is ears. [ETHEL laughs.] Wasn't I savage when you did that, dearie ! But you was right 'as it turned out. For Geoffy proposed next day. And now you'll be a real married woman. There's nothing like being married. It's so respectable. When you're married you can look down on people. And that's what every woman wants. That's why I pinched and screwed and sent you to boarding school. I said my girlie shall be a real lady. And she is. [Much moved at the reflection.]

ETHEL. Is she, mums ?

MRS. BORRIDGE. Of course, dearie. That's why she's 'ere. Deynham Abbey, *two* footmen in livery, fire in 'er bedroom, evenin' dress every night of 'er life. *Lady* Marchmont invited to meet her !

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Everythin' tip top ! And it's not a bit too good for my girl. It's what she was made for.

ETHEL [*thoughtfully*]. I wish Johnny Travers had had some money. Then I could have married him.

MRS. BORRIDGE. *Married 'im—him ! Married a auctioneer's clerk without twopence to bless 'issel.* I should think not indeed ! Not likely !

ETHEL. Still, I was awfully gone on Johnny.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*decidedly*]. Nonsense, Eth. I should 'ope we can look 'igher than *that* !

ETHEL. Sh ! mother. Here's Geoff.

[GEOFFREY, *in riding breeches, comes out of the house.*]

GEOFFREY. Good morning, dear. [*Kisses ETHEL.*] I thought I should be back earlier, but I rode over to Milverton for the mater. [*To MRS. BORRIDGE.*] Good morning.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*archly*]. You 'aven't no kisses to spare for *me*, 'ave you, Geoffy ? Never mind. You keep 'em all for my girl. She's worth 'em.

GEOFFREY [*caressing her hand*]. Dear Ethel.

MRS. BORRIDGE. How well you look in those riding togs, Geoffrey ! Don't 'e, Eth ?

[*Endeavouring to hoist herself out of her chair.*]

ETHEL [*smiling at him*]. Geoff always looks well in everything.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Well, I'll go indoors and leave you two to spoon. That's what you want, *I* know. I'll go and talk to your ma.

[*Waddles off into the house, beaming.*]

GEOFFREY [*picking rose and bringing it to ETHEL.*]. A rose for the prettiest girl in England.

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ETHEL. Oh, Geoff, do you think so ?

GEOFFREY. Of course. The prettiest and the best. [Takes her hand.]

ETHEL. You do really love me, Geoff, don't you ?

GEOFFREY. Do you doubt it ? [Kisses her.]

ETHEL. No ; you're much too good to me, you know.

GEOFFREY. Nonsense, darling.

ETHEL. It's the truth. You're a gentleman and rich, and have fine friends. While mother and I are common as common.

GEOFFREY [firmly]. You're not.

ETHEL. Oh yes, we are. Of course, I've been to school, and been taught things. But what's education ? It can't alter how we're made, can it ? And she and I are the same underneath.

GEOFFREY. Ethel, you're not to say such things, or to think them.

ETHEL. But they're true, Geoff.

GEOFFREY. They're not. [Kisses her.] Say they're not.

ETHEL [shakes her head]. No.

GEOFFREY. Say they're not. [Kisses her.] Not !

ETHEL. Very well. They're not.

GEOFFREY. That's right. [Kiss.] There's a reward.

ETHEL [pulling herself away]. I wonder if I did right to say " Yes " when you asked me, Geoff ? Right for you, I mean.

GEOFFREY. Of course you did, darling. You love me, don't you ?

ETHEL. But wouldn't it have been best for you if I'd said " No " ? Then you'd have married Lady

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Somebody or other, with lots and lots of money, and lived happy ever afterwards.

GEOFFREY [*indignantly*]. I shouldn't.

ETHEL. Oh yes, you would.

GEOFFREY. And what would *you* have done, pray?

ETHEL. Oh, I should have taken up with some one else, or perhaps married old Buckfastleigh when his wife died.

GEOFFREY. Ethel!

ETHEL. I should. I'm not the sort to go on moping for long. I should have been awfully down for a bit, and missed you every day. But by-and-by I should have cheered up and married some one else. I could have done it. I could!

GEOFFREY. And what about *me*?

ETHEL. Wouldn't you have been happier in the end, dear? I'm not the sort of wife you ought to have married. Some day I expect you'll come to hate me. [*Sighs.*] Heigho.

GEOFFREY [*softly*]. You know I shan't, dear.

ETHEL. But I did so want to marry a gentleman. Mother wanted it too. [*Quite simply.*] So I said "Yes," you see.

GEOFFREY [*drawing her to him*]. Darling!

[*Kisses her tenderly.*]

ETHEL. Geoff, what did *your* mother say when you told her we were engaged? Was she dreadfully down about it?

GEOFFREY. No.

ETHEL. On your honour?

GEOFFREY. On my honour. Mother never said a single word to me against it. Lady Marchmont scolded me a bit. She's my aunt, you see.

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ETHEL. Old cat!

GEOFFREY. And so did Lady Remenham. She's my godmother. But mother stood up for us all through.

ETHEL [*sighs*]. I shall never get on with all your fine friends, Geoff.

GEOFFREY. You will. Any one who's as pretty as my Ethel can get on anywhere.

ETHEL. Yes, I *am* pretty, aren't I? I'm glad of that. It makes a difference, doesn't it?

GEOFFREY. Of course. In a week you'll have them all running after you.

ETHEL [*clapping her hands*]. Shall I, Geoff? Won't that be splendid! [*Kisses him*.] Oh, Geoff, I'm so happy. When shall we be married?

GEOFFREY. I'm afraid not till next year, dear. Next June, mother says.

ETHEL [*pouting*]. That's a *long* way off, Geoff.

GEOFFREY. Yes, but mother says you're to be here a *great* deal between now and then, almost all the time, in fact. So it won't be so bad, will it?

ETHEL. Why does your mother want it put off till then?

GEOFFREY. Something about the London season, she said. We shall be married in London, of course, because your mother's house is there.

ETHEL. Oh yes, of course.

GEOFFREY. And besides, mother says she never believes in very short engagements. She says girls sometimes don't quite know their own minds. I said I was sure *you* weren't like that. But she asked me to promise, so I did.

ETHEL. Well, that's settled then. [*Jumping up*.]

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And won't it be nice to be *married*? Really *married*! . . . And now I want to *do* something. I'm tired of sitting still. What shall it be?

GEOFFREY [with brilliant originality]. We might go for a walk up Milverton Hill. The view there's awfully fine. [Looks at watch.] But there's hardly time before lunch.

ETHEL. Besides, I should spoil my shoes.

[Puts out foot, the shoe of which is manifestly not intended for country walking.]

GEOFFREY. Suppose we go to the strawberry bed and eat strawberries?

ETHEL. Oh yes, that'll be splendid. I can be so deliciously greedy over strawberries.

[Puts her arm in his, and he leads her off to the strawberry beds. As they go off, MRS. CASSILIS, LADY MARCHMONT, and MRS. BORRIDGE come down from terrace.]

MRS. CASSILIS. Going for a stroll, dears?

GEOFFREY. Only as far as the strawberry bed, mother dear.

MRS. CASSILIS. Oughtn't dear Ethel to have a hat? The sun is very hot there.

ETHEL. I've got a parasol, Mrs. Cassilis.

[They disappear down the path.]

MRS. BORRIDGE [rallying her]. You weren't down to breakfast, Lady Marchmont.

LADY MARCHMONT. No, I—had a headache.

MRS. CASSILIS. Poor Margaret.

MRS. BORRIDGE [sympathetically]. It's 'eadachy weather, isn't it?

[Subsiding into a chair. MRS. BORRIDGE makes it a rule of life never to stand when she can sit].

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LADY MARCHMONT. I suppose it is.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Or perhaps it was the oyster patties last night? I've often noticed after an oyster I come over quite queer. Specially if it isn't quite fresh.

LADY MARCHMONT. Indeed!

MRS. BORRIDGE. Yes. But crabs is worse. Crabs is simply poison to me.

LADY MARCHMONT [*faintly*]. How extraordinary.

MRS. BORRIDGE. They are, I do assure you. If I touch a crab I'm that ill nobody would believe it.

MRS. CASSILIS. Well, Margaret, I expect you oughtn't to be talked to or it will make your head worse. You stay here quietly and rest while I take Mrs. Borridge for a stroll in the garden.

LADY MARCHMONT. Thank you. [*Closing her eyes.*] My head is a little bad still.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*confidentially*]. Try a drop of brandy, Lady Marchmont. My 'usband always said there's nothing like brandy if you're feeling poorly.

LADY MARCHMONT. Thank you. I think I'll just try what rest will do.

MRS. CASSILIS [*making LADY MARCHMONT comfortable*]. I expect that will be best. Put your head back, dear. Headaches are such trying things, aren't they, Mrs. Borridge? This way! And you're to keep quite quiet till luncheon, Margaret.

[LADY MARCHMONT *closes her eyes, with a sigh of relief.* After a moment enter BUTLER from house, with MRS. HERRIES.]

BUTLER. Mrs. Herries.

[LADY MARCHMONT *rises, and goes up to meet her.*]

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How do you do? Mrs. Cassilis is in the garden, Watson. [To Mrs. HERRIES.] She has just gone for a stroll with Mrs. Borridge.

MRS. HERRIES. Oh, pray don't disturb her. Pray don't. I can only stay for a moment. Literally a moment.

LADY MARCHMONT. But she would be so sorry to miss you. Will you let her know, Watson? She went that way.

[*Pointing to path along which Mrs. CASSILIS went a moment before.*]

BUTLER. Yes, my lady.

LADY MARCHMONT. And how's the dear Rector? [She and Mrs. HERRIES sit.] You've not brought him with you?

MRS. HERRIES. No. He was too busy. There is always so much to do in these *small* parishes, isn't there?

LADY MARCHMONT. Indeed?

MRS. HERRIES. Oh yes. There's the garden—and the pigs. The Rector is devoted to his pigs, you know. And his roses.

LADY MARCHMONT. The Rector's roses are quite famous, aren't they?

[*But Mrs. HERRIES has not come to Deynham to talk horticulture, but to inquire about a far more interesting subject. She looks round cautiously, and then, lowering her voice to an undertone, puts the important question.*]

MRS. HERRIES. And now tell me, dear Lady Marchmont, before Mrs. Cassilis comes back, what is she like?

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LADY MARCHMONT. Really, dear Mrs. Herries, I think I must leave you to decide that for yourself.

MRS. HERRIES [*sighs*]. So bad as that ! The Rector feared so. And the mother ? [*No answer*.] Just so ! What a pity. An *orphan* is so much easier to deal with.

LADY MARCHMONT [*laughing slightly*]. You may be glad to hear that Mr. Borridge *is* dead.

MRS. HERRIES. So Mrs. Cassilis said. How fortunate ! How very fortunate !

[MRS. CASSILIS, *followed by Mrs. BORRIDGE, return from their walk. WATSON brings up the rear.*]

MRS. HERRIES. Dear Mrs. Cassilis, how do you do ? [*Sympathetically*.] How are you ?

MRS. CASSILIS [*rather amused at Mrs. HERRIES's elaborate bedside manner*]. Quite well, thanks. It's Margaret who is unwell.

MRS. HERRIES. Indeed ! She didn't mention it.

LADY MARCHMONT [*hurriedly*]. I have a headache.

MRS. HERRIES. I'm so sorry.

MRS. CASSILIS [*sweetly*]. You have heard of my son's engagement, haven't you ? Dear Ethel is with us now, I'm glad to say. Let me introduce you to her mother.

MRS. HERRIES. How do you do ? [*Bows.*] What charming weather we're having, aren't we ?

MRS. CASSILIS. You'll stay to luncheon now you are here, won't you ?

[MRS. BORRIDGE *subsides into a chair.*]

MRS. HERRIES. I'm afraid I mustn't. I left the Rector at home. He will be expecting me.

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MRS. CASSILIS. Why didn't you bring him with you?

MRS. HERRIES. So kind of you, dear Mrs. Cassilis. [Nervously.] But he hardly liked— How is poor Geoffrey?

MRS. CASSILIS [*cheerfully*]. He's very well. He's in the kitchen garden with Ethel. At the strawberry bed. You'll see them if you wait.

MRS. HERRIES [*hastily*]. I'm afraid I can't. In fact, I must run away at once. I only looked in in passing. It's nearly one o'clock, and the Rector always likes his luncheon at one. [Shakes hands with *gush of sympathetic fervour*.] Good-bye, dear Mrs. Cassilis. Good-bye, Mrs. Borridge. [Bows.]

MRS. BORRIDGE [*stretching out her hand*]. Good-bye, Mrs.— I didn't rightly catch your name.

MRS. HERRIES. Herries. Mrs. Herries.

[Shakes hands *nervously*.]

MRS. BORRIDGE [*heartily*]. Good-bye, Mrs. 'Erris.

MRS. CASSILIS. And you're coming over to dine on Thursday? That's to-day week, you know. And the Rector, of course. You won't forget?

MRS. HERRIES. With pleasure. Good-bye, Lady Marchmont.

[*Looks at Mrs. BORRIDGE, who has turned away, then at LADY MARCHMONT, then goes off, much depressed, into the house. Pause.*]

MRS. BORRIDGE. I think I'll be going in too, Mrs. Cassilis, just to put myself straight for dinner.

MRS. CASSILIS. Yes. Do. Luncheon will be ready in half an hour.

[MRS. BORRIDGE *waddles off into the house*

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complacently. LADY MARCHMONT sinks limply into a chair, with a smothered groan. MRS. CASSILIS resumes her natural voice.]

How's your headache, Margaret ? Better ?

LADY MARCHMONT. Quite well. In fact, I never had a headache. That was a little deception on my part, dear, to excuse my absence from the breakfast table. Will you forgive me ?

[MRS. CASSILIS *nods without a smile. She looks perfectly wretched.* LADY MARCHMONT *makes a resolute effort to cheer her up by adopting a light tone, but it is obviously an effort.*]]

Breakfasts *are* rather a mistake, aren't they ? So trying to the temper. And that awful woman ! I felt a brute for deserting you. On the very first morning too. But I didn't feel strong enough to face her again so soon. How *could* Geoffrey do it !

MRS. CASSILIS [grimly]. Geoffrey's not going to marry *Mrs.* Borridge.

LADY MARCHMONT. He's going to marry the daughter. And she'll grow like her mother ultimately. All girls do, poor things.

MRS. CASSILIS [sighs]. Poor Geoffrey. I suppose there's something wrong in the way we bring boys up. When they reach manhood they seem quite unable to distinguish between the *right* sort of woman and—the other sort. A pretty face, and they're caught at once. It's only after they've lived for a few years in the world and got soiled and hardened—got what we call experience, in fact—that they even begin to understand the difference.

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LADY MARCHMONT [*decidedly*]. You ought to have sent Geoffrey to a public school. His father ought to have insisted on it.

MRS. CASSILIS. Poor Charley died when Geoff was only twelve. And when I was left alone I couldn't make up my mind to part with him. Besides, I hate the way public school boys look on women.

LADY MARCHMONT. Still, it's a safeguard.

MRS. CASSILIS [*dismally*]. Perhaps it is.

[*Neither of the sisters speaks for a moment. Both are plunged in painful thought. Suddenly LADY MARCHMONT looks up and catches sight of MRS. CASSILIS's face, which looks drawn and miserable. She goes over to her with something like a cry.*]

LADY MARCHMONT. My dear Adelaide, don't look like that. You frighten me.

MRS. CASSILIS [*pulling herself together*]. What's the matter ?

LADY MARCHMONT. Your face looked absolutely grey ! Didn't you sleep last night ?

MRS. CASSILIS. Not very much. [*Trying to smile.*] Has my hair gone grey, too ?

LADY MARCHMONT. Of course not.

MRS. CASSILIS. I feared it might.

LADY MARCHMONT. You poor dear !

MRS. CASSILIS [*impulsively*]. I am pretty still, am I not, Margaret ?

LADY MARCHMONT. My dear, you look perfectly sweet, as you always do. Only there *are* one or two little lines I hadn't noticed before. But your hair's lovely.

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MRS. CASSILIS [*eagerly*]. I'm glad of that. I shall need all my looks now—for Geoffrey's sake.

LADY MARCHMONT [*puzzled*]. Geoffrey's?

MRS. CASSILIS. Looks mean so much to a man, don't they? And he has always admired me. Now I shall want him to admire me more than ever.

LADY MARCHMONT. Why, dear?

MRS. CASSILIS [*with cold intensity*]. Because I have a rival.

LADY MARCHMONT. This detestable girl?

MRS. CASSILIS [*nods*]. Yes.

LADY MARCHMONT. My dear Adelaide, isn't it too late now?

MRS. CASSILIS. Too late? Why, the time has scarcely begun. At present Geoffrey is over head and ears in love with her. While that goes on we can do nothing. [*With absolute conviction.*] But it won't last.

LADY MARCHMONT [*surprised at her confidence*]. Won't it?

MRS. CASSILIS. No. That kind of love never does. It dies because it is a thing of the senses only. It has no foundation in reason, in common tastes, common interests, common associations. So it dies. [*With a bitter smile.*] My place is by its deathbed.

LADY MARCHMONT [*with a slight shudder*]. That sounds rather ghoulish.

MRS. CASSILIS. It is.

LADY MARCHMONT [*more lightly*]. Are you going to do anything to hasten its demise?

MRS. CASSILIS [*quite practical*]. Oh yes. In the first place, they're to stay here for a *long* visit. I want them to feel thoroughly at home. Vulgar

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people are so much more vulgar when they feel at home, aren't they ?

LADY MARCHMONT. You can hardly expect any change in that direction from *Mrs. Borridge*.

MRS. CASSILIS [*a short, mirthless laugh*]. I suppose not. [*Practical again.*] Then I shall ask lots of people to meet them. Oh, *lots* of people. So that Geoffrey may have the benefit of the contrast. I've asked Mabel to stay, by the way—for a week—to help to entertain *dear Ethel*. When those two are together it should open Geoffrey's eyes more than anything.

LADY MARCHMONT. Love is blind.

MRS. CASSILIS [*briskly*]. It sees a great deal better than it used to do, dear. Far better than it did when *we* were young people. [Pause.]

LADY MARCHMONT. Anything else ?

MRS. CASSILIS. Not at the moment. [*A ghost of a smile.*] Yes, by the way. There's Major Warrington.

LADY MARCHMONT [*shocked*]. You're not really going to consult that dissipated wretch ?

MRS. CASSILIS [*recklessly*]. I would consult the Witch of Endor if I thought she could help me—and if I knew her address. Oh, I'm prepared to go any lengths. I wonder if he would elope with her for a consideration ?

LADY MARCHMONT [*horrified*]. Adelaide, you wouldn't do that. It would be dreadful. Think of the scandal.

MRS. CASSILIS. My dear, if she would elope with Watson I'd raise his wages. [Rises.]

LADY MARCHMONT. Adelaide !

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MRS. CASSILIS [*defiantly*]. I would. Ah, Margaret, you've no children. [*Her voice quivering and her eyes shining with intensity of emotion.*] You don't know how it feels to see your son wrecking his life and not be able to prevent it. I love my son better than anything else in the whole world. There is nothing I wouldn't do to save him. That is how mothers are made. That's what we're for.

LADY MARCHMONT [*slight shrug*]. Poor girl!

MRS. CASSILIS [*fiercely*]. You're *not* to pity her, Margaret. I forbid you. She tried to steal away my son.

LADY MARCHMONT. Still——

MRS. CASSILIS [*impatiently*]. Margaret, don't be sentimental. The girl's not in *love* with Geoffrey. Any one can see that. She's in love with his position and his money, the money he will have some day. She doesn't really care two straws for him. It was a trap, a trap from the beginning, and poor Geoff blundered into it.

LADY MARCHMONT. She couldn't *make* the omnibus horse fall down!

MRS. CASSILIS. No. That was chance. But after that she set herself to catch him, and her mother egged her on no doubt, and taught her how to play her fish. And you pity her!

LADY MARCHMONT [*soothingly*]. I don't really. At least, I did for a moment. But I suppose you're right.

MRS. CASSILIS [*vehemently*]. Of course I'm right. I'm Geoffrey's mother. Who should know if I don't? Mothers have eyes. If she really cared for him I should know. I might try to blind myself,

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but I should *know*. But she doesn't. And she sha'n't marry him. She sha'n't!

LADY MARCHMONT. My dear, don't glare at me like that. *I'm* not trying to make the match.

MRS. CASSILIS. Was I glaring?

LADY MARCHMONT. You looked rather tigerish. [MRS. CASSILIS *gives short laugh. Pause.*] By the way, as she's *not* to be your daughter-in-law, is it necessary to be quite so affectionate to her all the time? It rather gets on my nerves.

MRS. CASSILIS. It is absolutely necessary. If there were any coolness between us the girl would be on her guard, and Geoffrey would take her side. That would be fatal. Geoffrey must never know how I feel towards her. No! When this engagement is broken off I shall kiss her affectionately at parting, and when the carriage comes round I shall shed tears.

LADY MARCHMONT [*wondering*]. Why?

MRS. CASSILIS. Because otherwise it would make a division between Geoffrey and me. And I couldn't bear that. I must keep his love whatever happens. And if I have to deceive him a little to keep it, isn't that what we women always have to do? In fact, I shall have to deceive everybody except you. Lady Remenham, Mrs. Herries, the whole county. If they once knew they would be sure to talk. Lady Remenham never does anything else, does she? And later on, when the engagement was all over and done with, Geoffrey would get to hear of it, and he'd never forgive me.

LADY MARCHMONT. My dear, your unscrupulousness appals me. [MRS. CASSILIS *shrugs impatiently.*] Well, it's not very *nice*, you must admit.

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MRS. CASSILIS [*exasperated*]. Nice ! Of course it's not *nice* ! Good heavens, Margaret, you don't suppose I like doing this sort of thing, do you ? I do it because I must, because it's the only way to save Geoffrey. If Geoffrey married her he'd be miserable, and I won't have that. Of course it would be *pleasanter* to be perfectly straightforward, and tell the girl I detest her. But if I did she'd marry Geoff if only to spite me. So I must trap her as she has trapped him. It's not a *nice* game, but it's the only possible one. [*More calmly*.] Yes, I must be on the best of terms with Ethel. [*With a smile of real enjoyment at the thought*.] And you must make friends with that appalling mother.

LADY MARCHMONT [*firmly*]. No, Adelaide ! I refuse !

MRS. CASSILIS [*crosses to her*]. You must. You must ! [*Takes her two hands and looks into her eyes*.

LADY MARCHMONT [*giving way, hypnotised*]. Very well. I'll do my best. [*Mrs. CASSILIS drops her hands and turns away with a sigh of relief*.] But I sha'n't come down to breakfast ! There are limits to my endurance. [*Plaintive*.] And I do so hate breakfasting in my room. The crumbs always get into my bed.

MRS. CASSILIS [*consoling her*]. Never mind. When we've won you shall share the glory.

LADY MARCHMONT [*doubtfully*]. You're going to win ?

MRS. CASSILIS [*nods*]. I'm going to win. I've no doubt whatever about that. I've brains and she hasn't. And brains always tell in the end. Besides,

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she did something this morning which made me sure that I should win.

LADY MARCHMONT [*trying to get back her old lightness of tone*]. She didn't eat with her knife?

MRS. CASSILIS [*resolutely serious*]. No. She—yawned.

LADY MARCHMONT [*puzzled*]. Yawned?

MRS. CASSILIS. Yes. Three times. When I saw that I knew that I should win.

LADY MARCHMONT [*peevish*]. My dear Adelaide, what *do* you mean?

MRS. CASSILIS. Girls like that can't endure boredom. They're used to excitement, the vulgar excitement of Bohemian life in London. Theatres, supper parties, plenty of fast society. She owned as much this morning. Well, down here she shall be dull, oh, how *dull!* I will see to that. The curate shall come to dinner. And old Lady Bellairs, with her tracts and her trumpet. I've arranged that it shall be a *long* engagement. She shall yawn to some purpose before it's over. And when she's bored she'll get cross. You'll see. She'll begin to quarrel with her mother, and nag at Geoffrey—at every one, in fact, except me. *I* shall be too sweet to her for that. [*With a long look into her sister's eyes.*] And that will be the beginning of the end.

LADY MARCHMONT [*turning away her eyes with something like a shiver*]. Well, dear, I think your plan diabolical. [*Rising.*] But your courage is perfectly splendid, and I love you for it. [*Lays hand on her shoulder for a moment caressingly.*] And now I'll go in and get ready for lunch.

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[LADY MARCHMONT turns to go into the house. As she does so the BUTLER comes out, followed by MABEL in riding habit. MRS. CASSILIS's manner changes at once. The intense seriousness with which she has been talking to her sister disappears in an instant, and instead you have the charming hostess, without a care in the world, only thinking of welcoming her guest and making her comfortable. It is a triumph of pluck—and breeding.]

BUTLER. Lady Mabel Venning.

MRS. CASSILIS [rising]. Ah, Mabel dear, how are you? [Kisses her.] You've ridden over? But you're going to stay here, you know. Haven't you brought your things?

MABEL. Mamma is sending them after me. It was such a perfect morning for a ride. How do you do, Lady Marchmont? [Shaking hands.]

MRS. CASSILIS. That's right. Watson, tell them to take Lady Mabel's horse round to the stables. She will keep it here while she is with us. [To MABEL.] Then you'll be able to ride every day with Geoffrey. [To LADY MARCHMONT.] Poor Ethel doesn't ride. Isn't it unfortunate?

LADY MARCHMONT. Very!

MRS. CASSILIS. She and Geoffrey are down at the strawberry bed spoiling their appetites for luncheon. Would you like to join them?

MABEL. I think not, thanks. It's rather hot, isn't it? I think I'd rather stay here with you.

MRS. CASSILIS. As you please, dear. [They sit.]

MABEL. Oh, before I forget, mamma asked me to tell you she telegraphed to Uncle Algernon yesterday,

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and he's coming down next Wednesday. She had a letter from him this morning by the second post. It came just before I started. Such a funny letter. Mamma asked me to bring it to you to read.

MRS. CASSILIS [*taking letter, and reading it aloud to her sister*]. "My dear Julia,—I am at a loss to understand to what I owe the honour of an invitation to Milverton. I thought I had forfeited all claim to it for ever. I can only suppose you have at last found an heiress to marry me. If this is so I may as well say at once that unless she is both extremely rich and extremely pretty I shall decline to entertain her proposal. My experience is that that is a somewhat unusual combination. I will be with you next Wednesday.—Your affectionate brother, A. L. Warrington." [*Giving back letter.*] That's right, then. And now I think I'll just go down to the kitchen garden and tell Geoffrey you're here. [*Rises.*] No, don't come too. You stay and entertain Margaret.

[*She goes off by the path leading to the strawberry beds.*]

LADY MARCHMONT. Dear Major Warrington. He always was the most delightfully witty, wicked creature. I'm so glad he's coming while I'm here. Adelaide must be sure and ask him over.

MABEL. Uncle Algernon is coming over to dine this day week—with mamma.

LADY MARCHMONT. To be sure; I remember.

[*Enter GEOFFREY quickly from garden.*]

GEOFFREY. Halloa, Mabel! How do you do? [*Shaking hands.*] I didn't know you were here.

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MABEL. Mrs. Cassilis has just gone to tell you.

GEOFFREY. I know. She met us as we were coming back from eating strawberries. We've been perfect pigs. She and Ethel will be here in a moment. I ran on ahead.

LADY MARCHMONT [rising]. Well, it's close on lunch time. I shall go in and get ready.

[LADY MARCHMONT goes off into the house, leaving the young people together. They begin to chatter at once with the easy familiarity of long acquaintance.]

GEOFFREY. You rode over?

[Sitting on the arm of her chair.

MABEL. Yes, on Basil. He really is the sweetest thing. I like him much better than Hector.

GEOFFREY. Poor old Hector. He's not so young as he was.

MABEL. No.

[GEOFFREY suddenly remembers that there is something more important than horses which he has to say before ETHEL arrives. He hesitates for a moment, and then plunges into his subject.]

GEOFFREY. Mabel . . . There's something I want to ask you.

MABEL. Is there?

GEOFFREY. Yes. But I don't know how to say it. [Hesitates again.]

MABEL [smiling]. Perhaps you'd better not try, then?

GEOFFREY. I must. I feel I ought. It's about something Aunt Margaret said yesterday. . . . [Blushing a little.] Mabel, did you ever . . . did

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I ever . . . did I ever do anything to make you think I . . . I was going to ask you to marry me ?

[*Looking her bravely in the face.*]

MABEL [*turning her eyes away*]. No, Geoff.

GEOFFREY. Sure ?

MABEL. Quite sure.

GEOFFREY. I'm glad.

MABEL [*looking up, surprised*]. Why, Geoff ?

GEOFFREY. Because from what Aunt Margaret said I was afraid, without intending it, I'd . . . I—hadn't been quite honourable.

MABEL [*gently*]. You have always been everything that is honourable, Geoff. And everything that is kind.

GEOFFREY [*relieved*]. Thank you, Mabel. You're a brick, you know. And we shall always be friends, sha'n't we ?

MABEL. Always.

[*Rises.*]

GEOFFREY. And you'll be friends with Ethel too ?

MABEL. If she'll let me.

GEOFFREY. Of course she'll let you. She's the dearest girl. She's ready to be friends with everybody. And she'll *love* you, I know. [*Stands up.*] You promise ?

[*Holds out hand.*]

MABEL [*takes it*]. I promise.

[*Mrs. CASSILIS and ETHEL enter at this moment from garden. Mrs. CASSILIS has her arm in ETHEL's, and they make a picture of mutual trust and affection which would make LADY MARCHMONT scream. Luckily, she is safely in her room washing her hands. Mrs. CASSILIS smiles sweetly at MABEL as she speaks,*

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but does not relax her hold on her future daughter-in-law.]

MRS. CASSILIS. Not gone in to get ready yet, Mabel?

MABEL. No. Lady Marchmont only went a minute ago.

MRS. CASSILIS [*to ETHEL*]. You've not met Mabel yet, have you? I must introduce you. Miss Borridge—Lady Mabel Venning. [*Sweetly.*] I want you two to be *great* friends! [*They shake hands.*] And now come in and get ready for luncheon.

[*They all move towards the house as the curtain falls.*]

ACT III

SCENE.—*The smoking-room at Deynham. A week has elapsed since the last Act, and the time is after dinner. The room has two doors, one leading to the hall and the rest of the house, the other communicating with the billiard-room. There is a fireplace on the left, in which a fire burns brightly. A writing-table occupies the centre of the stage. Further up is a grand piano. By its side a stand with music on it. Obviously a man's room from the substantial writing-table, with the cigar-box on it, and the leather-covered arm-chairs. "The Field" and "The Sportsman" lie on a sofa hard by. The room is lighted by lamps. The stage is empty when the curtain rises.* Then GEOFFREY enters from hall. He crosses to the door of the billiard-room, opens it, and looks in. Then turns and speaks to MAJOR WARRINGTON, who has just entered from hall. WARRINGTON is a cheerful, rather dissipated-looking man of five-and-forty.

GEOFFREY. It's all right, Warrington. They've lighted the lamps.

WARRINGTON. Good.

[*Strolling across towards fireplace.*

GEOFFREY [at door of billiard-room]. How many will you give me ?

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WARRINGTON. Oh, hang billiards ! I'm not up to a game to-night. That was only an excuse to get away from the women. I believe that's why games were invented. But if you *could* get me a whisky and soda I should be your eternal debtor. Julia kept such an infernally strict watch on me all the evening that I never got more than a glass and a half of champagne. A fellow can't get along on *that*, can he ?

GEOFFREY. I'll ring.

WARRINGTON. Do. There's a good fellow. [GEOFFREY rings.] Every man requires a certain amount of liquid per day. I've seen the statistics in "The Lancet." But Julia never reads "The Lancet." Women never do read anything, I believe.

GEOFFREY. Have another cigar ?

WARRINGTON. Thanks. Don't mind if I do. [Takes one and lights it.] Aren't you going to ?

GEOFFREY [who looks seedy and out of spirits]. No, thanks.

[Enter FOOTMAN, with whisky and soda.]

Whisky and soda, James.

FOOTMAN. Yes, sir.

[Puts it on small table and goes out.

WARRINGTON. Off your smoke ?

GEOFFREY. Yes. [Pouring whisky.] Say when.

WARRINGTON. When. [Takes soda.] You're not going to have one ?

GEOFFREY. No.

WARRINGTON. Off your drink ?

GEOFFREY. Yes.

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WARRINGTON. That's bad. What's the matter?

[Selects comfortable easy-chair and sits lazily.]

GEOFFREY. Oh, nothing. I'm a bit out of sorts, I suppose.

WARRINGTON. How well your mother looks to-night, by the way! Jove, what a pretty woman she is!

GEOFFREY. Dear mother.

WARRINGTON [sips whisky meditatively]. How does she like this marriage of yours?

GEOFFREY [off-hand]. All right.

WARRINGTON. Ah! [Nods.] Bites on the bullet. No offence, my dear fellow. I like her pluck.

GEOFFREY [exasperated]. I assure you, you're mistaken. My mother's been kindness itself over my engagement. She's never said a word against it from the first. I believe she's the only person in this infernal county who hasn't.

WARRINGTON. Except myself.

GEOFFREY. Except yourself. And *you* think me a thundering young fool.

WARRINGTON. Oh no.

GEOFFREY. Oh yes. I could see you looking curiously at me all through dinner—when you weren't eating—as if I were some strange beast. You think I'm a fool right enough.

WARRINGTON [stretching himself luxuriously]. Not at all. Miss Borridge is a very pretty girl, very bright, very amusin'. I sat next her at dinner, you know. Not quite the sort one *marries*, perhaps—as a rule—

GEOFFREY [crossly]. What do you mean?

WARRINGTON [shrugs]. Anyhow, *you're* going to

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marry her. So much the better for *her*. What amuses me is your bringing her old reprobate of a mother down here. The cheek of it quite takes away my breath.

GEOFFREY [*peevish*]. What's the matter with her mother? She's common, of course, and over-eats herself, but lots of people do that. And she's good-natured. That's more than some women are.

WARRINGTON [*looking thoughtfully at the end of his cigar*]. Still, she's scarcely the sort one introduces to one's *mother*, eh? But I'm old-fashioned, no doubt. There's no saying what you young fellows will do. Your code is peculiarly your own.

[*Wanders across in quest of another whisky and soda.*]

GEOFFREY [*restively*]. Look here, Warrington, what do you mean?

WARRINGTON [*easily*]. Want to hit me in the eye, don't you? I know. Very natural feeling. Lots of people have it.

GEOFFREY [*sulkily*]. Why shouldn't I introduce her to my mother?

WARRINGTON. Well, she's a disreputable old woman, you know. She lived with Borridge for years before he married her. The other daughter's— [*Shrugs shoulders.*] And then to bring her down here and introduce her to Julia! Gad, I like your humour.

GEOFFREY [*much perturbed at his companion's news*]. Are you sure?

WARRINGTON [*nonchalantly*]. Sure? Why, it's common knowledge. Everybody knows old Borridge, and most people loathe her. I don't.

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rather like her in a way. She's so splendidly vulgar. Flings her aitches about with reckless indifference. And I like her affection for that girl. She's really fond of *her*. So much the worse for you, by the way. You'll never be able to keep them apart.

GEOFFREY [*irritably*]. Why should I want to keep them apart?

WARRINGTON. Why should you—? [*Drinks.*] Oh, well, my dear chap, if *you're* satisfied—

GEOFFREY [*low voice*]. Her sister . . . ? Poor Ethel! Poor Ethel!

WARRINGTON [*with a good-natured effort to make the best of things*]. My dear chap, don't be so down in the mouth. There's no use fretting. I'd no idea you were so completely in the dark about all this, or I wouldn't have told you. Cheer up.

GEOFFREY [*huskily*]. I'm glad you told me.

WARRINGTON. To think you've been engaged all this time and never found it out! What amazing innocence! [*Chuckling.*] Ha! Ha! . . . Ha! Ha! Ha!

GEOFFREY. Don't. [*Sinks on to sofa with a groan.*]

WARRINGTON. Sorry, my dear boy. But it's so devilish amusing.

GEOFFREY. How blind I've been! How utterly blind!

WARRINGTON [*shrugs shoulders*]. Well, I rather like a chap who's a bit of an ass myself.

GEOFFREY. Poor mother!

WARRINGTON. Doesn't she know? Not about old Borridge? [*GEOFFREY shakes his head.*] She must! Women always do. They have an instinct about these things that is simply uncanny. It's often

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highly inconvenient too, by the way. She probably says nothing on *your* account.

GEOFFREY [*dismally*]. Perhaps so. Or Ethel's. She's been wonderfully kind to Ethel ever since she came down. Perhaps that's the reason. [Rises.] After all, it's not Ethel's fault.

WARRINGTON. Of course not. [*Looks at him curiously, then, with an instinct of kindness, goes to him and lays hand on shoulder.*] Well, here's luck, my dear boy, and I won't say may you never repent it, but may you put off repenting it as long as possible. That's the best one can hope of most marriages.

GEOFFREY [*drily*]. Thanks !

WARRINGTON. Well, it's been an uncommon amusin' evening. Mrs. Herries' face has been a study for a lifetime. And as for Julia's—oh, outraged respectability ! What a joy it is !

[*Further conversation is interrupted by the entrance of the other guests from the hall. These are LADY REMENHAM, LADY MARCHMONT, MRS. HERRIES, MRS. BORRIDGE, ETHEL, and MABEL. Last of all comes the RECTOR, with MRS. CASSILIS. They enter with a hum of conversation.*]

RECTOR [*to his hostess*]. Well, he's a disreputable poaching fellow. It's no more than he deserved.

MRS. CASSILIS [*nods dubiously*]. Still, I'm sorry for his wife.

MRS. HERRIES. I'll send down to her in the morning and see if she wants anything.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*beaming with good humour*]. So this is where you gentlemen have got to !

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GEOFFREY. I brought Major Warrington to smoke a cigar.

LADY REMENHAM [*looking fixedly at whisky, then at WARRINGTON.*] Algernon !

WARRINGTON [*protesting*]. My dear Julia, I believe there is nothing unusual in a man's requiring *one* whisky and soda at this time in the evening.

LADY REMENHAM. I trust it has been only one.

[*Sits on sofa, where she is joined by LADY MARCHMONT.*]

WARRINGTON [*changing the subject*]. Whom have you been sending to jail for poaching now, Rector ? No Justice's justice, I hope ?

RECTOR. Old Murcatt. He's one of Mrs. Cassilis's tenants. A most unsatisfactory fellow. He was caught red-handed laying a snare in the Milverton woods. It was a clear case.

[*ETHEL stifles a yawn.*]

ETHEL. I should have thought there was no great harm in that.

RECTOR. My dear young lady !

MRS. CASSILIS. Take care, Ethel dear. An Englishman's hares are sacred.

MRS. BORRIDGE. How silly ! I can't bear 'are myself.

[*Seats herself massively in arm-chair in front of piano. An awkward silence follows this insult to hares. As it threatens to grow oppressive, the RECTOR tries what can be done with partridges to bridge the gulf.*]

RECTOR. You'll have plenty of partridges this year, Mrs. Cassilis. We started five coveys as we drove here.

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MRS. CASSILIS [acknowledging his help with a smile]. We generally have a good many.

[ETHEL, stifling another yawn, strolls to piano, opens it, and strikes a note or two idly.]

MABEL. You play, I know, Ethel. Won't you play something?

ETHEL [sulkily]. No.

[Turns away, closing piano sharply. Another constrained silence.]

MRS. HERRIES. I saw you out riding to-day, Mabel. I looked in at Dobson's cottage. Poor fellow, I'm afraid he's very ill.

MABEL. Yes. I was with Geoffrey. We had a long ride, all through Lower Milverton and Carbury to Mirstoke. It was delightful.

MRS. BORRIDGE [to MRS. HERRIES]. Your husband has a lot of that sort of thing to do down here, I suppose, Mrs. 'Erris?

MRS. HERRIES [with frosty politeness]. When people are ill they generally like a visit from a clergyman, don't they?

MRS. BORRIDGE [bluntly]. Well, there's no accounting for tastes. My 'usband, when he was ill, wouldn't 'ave a parson near 'im. Said it gave 'im the creeps.

[Another silence that can be felt. WARRINGTON's shoulders quiver with delight, and he chokes hurriedly into a newspaper.]

LADY MARCHMONT [crossing to fire, with polite pretence that it is the physical, not the social, atmosphere that is freezing her to the bone.] How sensible of you to have a fire, Adelaide.

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MRS. CASSILIS [*throwing her a grateful look*]. It is pleasant, isn't it? These July evenings are often cold in the country.

[*ETHEL stifles a prodigious yawn.*]

GEOFFREY [*going to her*]. Tired, Ethel?

ETHEL [*pettishly*]. No.

[*Glowers at him. He turns away with slight shrug.*
There is yet another awkward pause.]

MRS. CASSILIS [*rising nervously*]. Won't somebody play billiards? Are the lamps lighted, Geoffrey?

GEOFFREY. Yes, mother.

MRS. CASSILIS. Or shall we play pyramids? Then we can all join in. [*Persuasively.*] You'll play, Mrs. Borridge, I'm sure?

MRS. BORRIDGE [*beaming*]. I'm on.

MRS. CASSILIS. You, Lady Remenham?

LADY REMENHAM. No, thanks. Mrs. Herries and I are going to stay by the fire and talk about the Rector's last sermon.

[*The Rector raises hands in horror.*]

MRS. CASSILIS. You, Margaret?

LADY MARCHMONT. No, really. I've never played pyramids in my life.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*in high good humour*]. Then it's high time you began, Lady Marchmont. I'll teach you.

[*MRS. CASSILIS looks entreaty. LADY MARCHMONT assents, smiling.*]

LADY MARCHMONT. Very well. To please you, dear Mrs. Borridge!

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[LADY MARCHMONT goes off to billiard-room, followed a moment later by MABEL.]

MRS. CASSILIS. You, Mabel ? That's threc. Ethel four.

ETHEL. No, thank you, Mrs. Cassilis. I won't play.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Why not, Eth ? You're a nailer at pyramids.

ETHEL [*pettishly*]. Because I'd rather not, mother.

[Turns away.]

MRS. BORRIDGE. All right, dearic. You needn't snap my nose off.

[Goes off to billiard-room with unruffled cheerfulness.]

MRS. CASSILIS. Geoffrey five. The Rector six.

RECTOR. Very well, if you won't play for money. I've no conscientious objections to playing for money, but whenever I do it I always lose. Which comes to the same thing. [Follows MRS. BORRIDGE off.]

MRS. CASSILIS. You, Major Warrington, of course ?

WARRINGTON [*laughing*]. No, thanks. I shall stay here and flirt with Mrs. Herries.

MRS. CASSILIS. Very well. How many did I say ? Six, wasn't it ? And myself seven. Coming, Geoff ?

GEOFFREY. All right, mother.

[GEOFFREY looks doubtfully at ETHEL for a moment, and even takes a step towards her, but she takes no notice of him. Baffled, he turns to his mother, who leads him off after the others. LADY REMENHAM settles herself comfortably in arm-chair above the fireplace. MRS. HERRIES takes another by her, and they begin to gossip contentedly. ETHEL looks sullenly in

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their direction. WARRINGTON makes a valiant effort to retrieve his glass from the mantelpiece, with a view to replenishing it with whisky.]

LADY REMENHAM. Now, Mrs. Herries, draw up that chair to the fire, and we'll talk scandal.

WARRINGTON [*stretching out hand towards glass*].
The Rector's sermon, Julia !

LADY REMENHAM. Algernon !

[*He stops dead. ETHEL seats herself in the arm-chair behind the writing-table, puts her elbows on the table, and glares into vacancy, looking rather like a handsome fury. Presently WARRINGTON joins her. She yawns with unaffected weariness. WARRINGTON looks at her with an amused smile.*]

WARRINGTON. Bored, Miss Borridge ?

ETHEL. I wonder.

WARRINGTON [*draws up chair by her*]. I don't.
[*She laughs.*] Life isn't very lively down here till the shooting begins.

ETHEL [*drumming with her fingers on table*]. I don't shoot. So I'm afraid that won't help me much.

WARRINGTON. I remember. Nor ride, I think you told me ?

ETHEL [*yawns*]. Nor ride.

WARRINGTON. Gad. I'm sorry for you.

ETHEL [*looking curiously at him*]. I believe you really are.

WARRINGTON. Of course I am.

ETHEL. I don't know about "of course." Except for Mrs. Cassilis—and poor Geoff—who doesn't count—I don't find much sympathy in *this* part of the country. Heigho ! How they hate me !

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WARRINGTON [*protesting*]. No, no.

ETHEL. Oh yes, they do. Every one of them. From Watson, who pours out my claret at dinner, and would dearly love to poison it, to your sister, who is glaring at us at this moment.

[*As, indeed, LADY REMENHAM is doing with some intensity. She highly disapproves of her brother's attentions to ETHEL, but, as there is no very obvious method of stopping them, she says nothing. Presently she and MRS. HERRIES begin a game of bezique, and that for the time, at least, distracts her attention from her brother's depravity.*]

WARRINGTON [*looking up and laughing*]. Dear Julia. She never had any manners.

ETHEL. She's no worse than the rest. Mrs. Herries would do just the same if she dared. And as for Mabel——!

WARRINGTON. Don't hit it off with Mabel?

ETHEL. Oh, we don't quarrel, if that's what you mean, or call one another names across the table. I wish we did. I could beat her at that. We're as civil as the Devil. [*He laughs.*] What are you laughing at?

WARRINGTON. Only at the picturesqueness of your language.

ETHEL [*shrugs*]. Yes, Mabel despises me, and I hate her.

WARRINGTON. Why?

ETHEL [*wearily*]. Because we're different, I suppose. She's everything I'm not. She's well-born and well-bred. Her father's an earl. Mine was a bookmaker.

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WARRINGTON. Is that all?

ETHEL. [bitterly]. No. She's running after Geoffrey. [WARRINGTON looks incredulous.] She is!

WARRINGTON [raising eyebrows]. Jealous?

ETHEL. Yes. I am jealous. Little beast! [Picks up flimsy paper-knife.] I'd like to kill her.

[Makes savage jab with knife. It promptly breaks.

WARRINGTON [taking pieces out of her hand]. Don't be violent.

[Carries pieces blandly to fire. ETHEL stares straight in front of her. Meantime LADY REMENHAM has been conversing in an undertone with MRS. HERRIES, occasionally glancing over her shoulder at the other two. In the sudden hush which follows WARRINGTON's movement towards the fireplace her voice suddenly becomes alarmingly audible.]

LADY REMENHAM. Such a common little thing, too! And I don't even call her pretty.

MRS. HERRIES. It's curious how Mrs. Cassilis seems to have taken to her.

LADY REMENHAM. Yes. She even tolerates that awful mother. [Irritably.] What is it, Algernon?

WARRINGTON [blandly]. Only a little accident with a paper-knife.

[LADY REMENHAM grunts. WARRINGTON returns to ETHEL.]

MRS. HERRIES [lowering her voice discreetly]. For Geoffrey's sake, of course. She's so devoted to him.

LADY REMENHAM. It may be that. I'm inclined to think her mind has given way a little. I asked her about it last week.

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[*The two ladies drop their voices again to a murmur, but ETHEL has heard the last remark or two, and looks like murder.*]

WARRINGTON [*sitting by ETHEL and resuming interrupted thread*]. You were going to tell me what makes you think Mabel is in love with Geoffrey.

ETHEL. Was I ?

WARRINGTON. Weren't you ?

ETHEL. Well, perhaps I will.

WARRINGTON. Go ahead.

ETHEL. She's staying here, and they're always together. They ride almost every morning. I can't ride, you know. And Geoffrey loves it.

WARRINGTON. You should take to it.

ETHEL. I did try one day. They were just starting when I suddenly said I'd like to go with them.

WARRINGTON [*starting*]. What did they say to that ?

ETHEL. Oh, Mabel pretended to be as pleased as possible. She lent me an old habit, and Geoff said they'd let me have a horse that was as quiet as a lamb. Horrid kicking beast !

WARRINGTON. What horse was it ?

ETHEL. It was called Jasmine, or some such name.

WARRINGTON. Mrs. Cassilis's mare ? Why, my dear girl, she hasn't a kick in her.

ETHEL. Hasn't she ! . . . Anyhow, we started. So long as we walked it was all right, and I began to think I might actually get to like it. But soon we began to trot—and that was *awful*. I simply screamed. The beast stopped at once. But I went on screaming till they got me off.

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WARRINGTON. What did Geoffrey say ?

ETHEL. Nothing. But he looked terrible. Oh, how he despised me !

WARRINGTON. Poor girl.

ETHEL. They brought me back, walking all the way. And Geoff offered to give up riding in the mornings if I liked. [WARRINGTON *whistles*.] But, of course, I had to say no. So now they go out together every day, and often don't come back till lunch.

WARRINGTON. And what do *you* do ?

ETHEL [wearily]. I sit at home and yawn and yawn. [Does so.] Mrs. Cassilis takes me out driving sometimes. She does what she can to amuse me. But of course she's busy in the mornings.

WARRINGTON. What does Mrs. Borridge do ?

ETHEL. Lady Marchmont looks after her. I believe she gets a kind of pleasure in leading her on and watching her make a fool of herself. Old cat ! And mother sees nothing. She's as pleased with herself as possible. She's actually made Lady Marchmont promise to come and stay with us in London !

WARRINGTON. Bravo, Mrs. Borridge !

ETHEL. So I sit here in the drawing-room with a book or the newspaper and I'm bored ! bored !

WARRINGTON. And Geoffrey ?

ETHEL. He doesn't seem to notice. If I say anything to him about it he just says I'm not *well* ! He's very kind and tries to find things to amuse me, but it's a strain. And so it goes on day after day. Heigho ! [A short silence.]

WARRINGTON. Well, my dear, I admire your courage.

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ETHEL [*surprised*]. What do you mean?

WARRINGTON. A lifetime of this! Year in year out. Till you can yawn yourself decently into your grave.

ETHEL [*alarmed*]. But it won't always be like this. We shan't *live* here, Geoff and I.

WARRINGTON. Oh yes, you will. Mrs. Cassilis was talking only at dinner of the little house she was going to furnish for you both down here, just on the edge of the Park. So that you could always be near her.

ETHEL. But Geoff has his profession.

WARRINGTON. His profession is only a name. He makes nothing at it. And never will. Geoffrey's profession is to be a country gentleman and shoot pheasants.

ETHEL. But we shall have a house in London as well.

WARRINGTON [*shaking his head*]. Not you. As long as his mother lives Geoffrey will be dependent on her, you know. He has nothing worth calling an income of his own. And he's proud. He won't accept more from her than he's obliged even if her trustees would allow her to hand over anything substantial to him on his marriage—which they wouldn't.

ETHEL [*defiantly*]. I shall refuse to live down here.

WARRINGTON. My dear, you won't be asked. You'll have to live where Mrs. Cassilis provides a house for you. Besides, Geoff will prefer it. He likes the country, and he's devoted to his mother.

ETHEL. Phew!

WARRINGTON. Happily, it won't last for ever.

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I dare say you'll have killed poor Mrs. Cassilis off in a dozen years or so. Though you never know how long people will last nowadays, by the way. These modern doctors are the devil.

ETHEL. Kill her off ? What do you mean ? I don't want to kill Mrs. Cassilis. I like her.

WARRINGTON [*looking at her in genuine astonishment*]. My dear young lady, you don't suppose you'll be able to *stand* this sort of thing, do you ? Oh no. You'll kick over the traces, and there'll be no end of a scandal, and Geoff'll blow his brains out—if he's got any—and she'll break her heart, and that'll be the end of it.

ETHEL [*fiercely*]. It won't.

WARRINGTON. Oh yes, it will. You don't know what Country Society is. The dulness of it ! How it eats into your bones. *I* do.

ETHEL. Does it bore *you* too ?

WARRINGTON. Bore ? It bores me to *tears* ! I'm not a bad lot really. At least, no worse than most middle-aged bachelors. But Julia thinks me an utterly abandoned character, and I take care not to undeceive her. Why ? Because I find Milverton so intolerable. I used to come down every Christmas. One of those ghastly family reunions. A sort of wake without the corpse. At last I couldn't stand it, and did something perfectly outrageous. I forget what, but I know the servants all gave warning. So now I'm supposed to be thoroughly disreputable, and that ass Remenham won't have me asked to the house. Thank Heaven for that !

ETHEL. But Geoff likes the country.

WARRINGTON. I dare say. But Geoffrey and I

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are different. So are Geoffrey and you. You and I are town birds. He's a country bumpkin. *I* know the breed !

ETHEL [*in horror*]. And I shall have to stand this all my life ! All my life ! [*Savagely*.] I won't ! I won't !

WARRINGTON [*calmly*]. You will !

ETHEL. I won't, I tell you ! [WARRINGTON *shrugs*.] It's too sickening. [*Pause. She seems to think for a moment, then grasps him by the arm, and speaks eagerly, dropping her voice, and looking cautiously over towards the others.*]

I say, let's go off to Paris, you and I, and leave all this. It'd be awful fun.

WARRINGTON [*appalled, rising*]. Hush ! Hush ! For God's sake. Julia'll hear.

ETHEL [*almost in a whisper*]. Never mind. What does it matter ? Let's go. You'd enjoy it like anything. We'll have no end of a good time.

WARRINGTON [*shaking himself free, desperately*]. My dear young lady, haven't I just told you that I'm not that sort at all ? I'm a perfectly respectable person, of rather austere morality than otherwise.

ETHEL. Rot ! You'll come ?

[*Grasping his arm again.*

WARRINGTON. No, I won't. I decline. I can't go off with the girl my host is going to marry. It wouldn't be decent. Besides, I don't want to go off with anybody.

ETHEL [*her spirits dropping to zero*]. You won't ?

WARRINGTON [*testily*]. No, I won't. And, for goodness' sake, speak lower. Julia's listening with all her ears.

ETHEL [*with a bitter little laugh*]. Poor Major Warrington ! How I scared you !

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WARRINGTON. I should say you did. I'm not so young as I was. A few years ago, a little thing like that never made me turn a hair. Now I can't stand it.

[*Subsiding into chair and wiping the perspiration from his brow.*]

ETHEL. You've gone through it before, then?

WARRINGTON. More than once, my dear.

ETHEL [*dismally*]. And now you'll look down on me too.

WARRINGTON [*trying to cheer her up*]. On the contrary, I admire you immensely. In fact, I don't know which I admire more, your pluck or your truly marvellous self-control. To ask me to go off with you without letting Julia hear! [*Looking anxiously towards her.*] It was masterly.

ETHEL [*sighs*]. Well, I suppose I shall have to marry Geoff after all.

WARRINGTON. I suppose so. Unless you could go off with the Rector.

[*She laughs shrilly. The two ladies turn sharply and glare.*]

ETHEL. Now I've shocked your sister again.

WARRINGTON. You have. She thinks I'm flirting with you. That means I sha'n't be asked down to Milverton for another five years. Thank heaven for that! Ah, here are the billiard players.

[*He rises, with a sigh of relief. The conversation has been amusing, but not without its perils, and he is not altogether sorry to have it safely over. ETHEL remains seated, and does not turn round. The billiard players troop in, headed by MABEL, GEOFFREY holding open the door for them.*]

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GEOFFREY [to MABEL]. You fluked outrageously, you know.

MABEL [entering]. I didn't !

GEOFFREY. Oh yes, you did. Didn't she, mother ?

MRS. CASSILIS [smiling at her]. Disgracefully.

MRS. BORRIDGE. You'll soon learn, Lady Marchmont, if you practise a bit.

LADY MARCHMONT. Do you think so ?

LADY REMENHAM. Well, who won, Rector ?

MRS. BORRIDGE. I did.

LADY REMENHAM. Indeed ?

[Turns frigidly away, losing all interest at once.

MRS. BORRIDGE [obstinately cheerful and friendly]. Why didn't you play, Mrs. 'Erris ?

MRS. HERRIES [frigid smile]. I never play games.

MRS. BORRIDGE. You should learn. I'd teach you.

MRS. HERRIES [who longs to be as rude as LADY REMENHAM but has not quite the courage]. Thank you. I fear I have no time.

[Joins LADY REMENHAM again, ruffling her feathers nervously.]

MRS. CASSILIS. Ethel, dear, we missed you sadly. I hope you haven't been dull ?

ETHEL [with hysterical laugh]. Not at all. Major Warrington has been entertaining me.

RECTOR. I suspect Miss Borridge felt there would be no opponent worthy of her steel.

[ETHEL shrugs her shoulders rudely. He turns away.]

MRS. CASSILIS [as a last resort]. I wonder if we could have some music now. Mabel, dear, won't you sing to us ?

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MABEL. I've got nothing with me.

GEOFFREY. Do sing, Mabel. There'll be lots of things you know here. [Opens the piano.] Let me find something. Schumann?

MABEL [shakes head]. I think not.

[Joins him in searching music stand.]

MRS. CASSILIS. Sing us that Schubert song you sang when we were dining with you last, dear.

MABEL. Very well. Where's Schubert, Geoffrey?

ETHEL [to WARRINGTON]. Do you see that?

[Watching GEOFFREY's and MABEL's heads in close proximity. Seems as if she were about to jump from her chair. WARRINGTON restrains her by a hand on her arm.]

WARRINGTON. Sh! Be quiet, for heaven's sake.

ETHEL [hisses]. The little cat!

MABEL. Here it is. Geoff, don't be silly.

[Turns to piano.]

MRS. CASSILIS. Can you see there?

MABEL. Yes, thank you.

[She sings two verses of Schubert's "Adieu," in German, very simply, in a small but sweet voice. While she sings the behaviour of the guests affords a striking illustration of the English attitude towards music after dinner. GEOFFREY stands by piano prepared to turn over when required. LADY REMENHAM sits on sofa in an attitude of seraphic appreciation of her daughter's efforts. LADY MARCHMONT, by her side, is equally enthralled—and thinks of something else. MRS. HERRIES gently beats time with her fan. MRS. CASSILIS is sweetly appreciative. The BORRIDGES on the contrary, fall sadly below the standard of polite

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attention required of them. ETHEL, who has begun by glaring defiantly at MABEL during the first few bars of the song, rapidly comes to the conclusion that she can't sing, and decides to ignore the whole performance. MRS. BORRIDGE begins by settling herself placidly to the task of listening. She is obviously puzzled and rather annoyed when the song turns out to be German, but decides to put up with it with a shrug, hoping it will soon be over. At the end of the first verse she turns to MRS. CASSILIS to begin to talk, but that lady, with a smile and a gesture, silences her, and the second verse begins. At this MRS. BORRIDGE's jaw falls, and, after a few bars, she frankly addresses herself to slumber. Her purple, good-natured countenance droops upon her shoulder as the verse proceeds, and when she wakes up at the end it is with a visible start. WARRINGTON, meantime, has disgraced himself in the eyes of his sister by talking to ETHEL during the opening bars of the second verse, and has only been reduced to silence by the stony glare which she thenceforward keeps fixed upon him till the last bar. In self-defence, he leans back in his chair and contemplates the ceiling resolutely.]

GEOFFREY [clapping]. Bravo ! Bravo !

RECTOR. Charming, charming.

LADY MARCHMONT [to LADY REMENHAM]. What a sweet voice she has.

MRS. CASSILIS. Thank you, dear.

RECTOR [to MABEL, heartily]. Now we must have another.

GEOFFREY. Do, Mabel.

MABEL. No. That's quite enough.

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RECTOR [*with resolute friendliness*]. Miss Borridge, you sing, I'm sure.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Do, dearie. [*To LADY REMENHAM.*] My girl has a wonderful voice, Lady Remling. Quite like a professional. Old Jenkins at the Tiv. used to say she'd make a fortune in the 'alls.

LADY REMENHAM [*frigidly*]. Indeed?

ETHEL. I don't think I've any songs any one here would care for.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Nonsense, dearie. You've lots of songs. Give them "The Children's 'Ome."

ETHEL [*rising*]. Well, I'll sing if you like.

GEOFFREY [*going to her*] Shall I find you something, Ethel?

ETHEL [*snaps*]. No!

[GEOFFREY turns away snubbed, and joins MABEL. ETHEL goes to the piano, where she is followed a moment later by WARRINGTON, who stands behind it, facing audience, and looking much amused as her song proceeds. ETHEL takes her seat at piano. There is a moment's pause while she darts a glance at GEOFFREY standing with MABEL. Then she seems to make up her mind, and, without prelude of any kind, plunges into the following refined ditty:

When Joey takes me for a walk, me an' my sister Lue,
'E puts 'is arms round both our waists, as lots o'
men will do.
We don't allow no liberties, and so we tells 'im
plain,
And Joey says 'e's sorry—but 'e does the same
again!

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(Spoken) Well, we're not going to have that, you know. Not likely! We're not that sort. So we just says to 'im :

Stop that, Joey! Stow it, Joe!

Stop that ticklin' when I tell yer toe.

You're too free to suit a girl like me,

Just you stop that ticklin' or I'll slap yer!

When Joe an' me is man an' wife—I thinks 'e loves me true,

I 'ope 'e'll go on ticklin' me—and leave off ticklin' Lue.

'E'll have to leave the girls alone, and mind what 'e's about,

Or 'im an' me an' Lucy 'ill precious soon fall out.

(Spoken) Yes, I'm not going to put up with that sort of thing once we're married. Not I. If 'e tries it on I shall just sing out straight :

Now then, all of you. [Looks across impudently towards LADY REMENHAM, who bristles with indignation.]

Stop that, Joey! Chuck it, Joe!

Stop that ticklin' when I tell yer toe.

You're too free to suit a girl like me,

Just you drop that ticklin' or I'll slap yer!

[Sings chorus fortissimo, joined by her delighted mother and by WARRINGTON, who beats time sonorously on the top of the piano. For this attention she slaps him cordially on the cheek at the last line, by way of giving an artistic finish to the situation, and then rises, flushed and excited, and stands by the piano, looking defiantly at her horrified audience.]

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WARRINGTON. Splendid, by Jove! Capital!

[That, however, is clearly not the opinion of the rest of the listeners, for the song has what is called a "mixed" reception. The ladies, for the most part, had originally settled themselves into their places prepared to listen to anything which was set before them with polite indifference. A few bars, however, suffice to convince them of the impossibility of that attitude. LADY REMENHAM, who is sitting on the sofa by LADY MARCHMONT, exchanges a horrified glance with that lady, and with MRS. HERRIES on the other side of the room. MABEL looks uncomfortable. The RECTOR feigns abstraction. MRS. CASSILIS remains calm and sweet, but avoids every one's eye, and more particularly GEOFFREY's, who looks intensely miserable. But WARRINGTON enjoys himself thoroughly, even down to the final slap, and as for MRS. BORRIDGE, her satisfaction is unmeasured. She beats time to the final chorus, wagging her old head and joining in in stentorian accents, finally jumping up from her chair, clapping her hands, and crying, "That's right, Eth. Give 'em another." In fact, she feels that the song has been a complete triumph for her daughter, and a startling vindication of Old Jenkins's good opinion of her powers. Suddenly, however, she becomes conscious of the horrified silence which surrounds her. The cheers die away on her lips. She looks round the room, dazed and almost frightened, then hurriedly reseats herself in her chair, from which she has risen in her excitement, straightens her wig, and—there is an awful pause.]

MRS. CASSILIS [feeling she must say something].

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Won't you come to the fire, Ethel? You must be cold out there.

ETHEL. Thank you, Mrs. Cassilis. I'm not cold.

WARRINGTON. Jove, Miss Borridge, I'd no idea you could sing like that.

ETHEL [*with a sneer*]. Nor had Geoffrey.

LADY REMENHAM [*rising*]. Well, we must be getting home. Geoffrey, will you ask if the carriage is round?

GEOFFREY. Certainly, Lady Remenham. [*Rings*.]

MRS. HERRIES. We must be going, too. Come, Hildebrand. [*Rising also*.]

LADY REMENHAM. Are you coming with us, Mabel?

MRS. CASSILIS. Oh no, I can't spare Mabel yet. She has promised to stay a few days more.

LADY REMENHAM. Very well.

Enter BUTLER.

GEOFFREY. Lady Remenham's carriage.

BUTLER. It's at the door, sir.

GEOFFREY. Very well.

[Exit BUTLER.]

LADY REMENHAM. Good-bye, then, dear. Such a pleasant evening. Good night, Mabel. We shall expect you when we see you.

[General leave-takings.]

MRS. HERRIES. Good-bye, Mrs. Cassilis.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Good night, Lady Remling.

[Holds out hand with nervous cordiality.]

LADY REMENHAM. Good night.

[Sweeps past her with icy bow.] MRS. BORRIDGE

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retires crushed to a chair by fire, and consoles herself with illustrated paper.]

LADY REMENHAM [*to WARRINGTON, who is devoting his last moments to Miss BORRIDGE*]. Algernon.

WARRINGTON. Coming, Julia. [*To ETHEL*.] See you in London, then?

GEOFFREY [*stiffly*]. You'll take another cigar, Warrington—to light you home?

WARRINGTON. Thanks. Don't mind if I do.

[GEOFFREY *hands box*.]

LADY REMENHAM [*sternly*]. Algernon. We're going to get on our wraps.

[MRS. CASSILIS and LADY REMENHAM, MRS. HERRIES and the RECTOR, *go out*.]

WARRINGTON. All right, Julia. I shall be ready as soon as you are.

GEOFFREY [*motioning to whisky*]. Help yourself, Warrington. [Goes out after the others.]

WARRINGTON [*to ETHEL, after helping himself to drink*]. Well, my dear, I'm afraid you've done it this time!

ETHEL. Done what?

WARRINGTON. Shocked them to some purpose! It was magnificent, but it was scarcely tactics, eh?

ETHEL. I suppose not. [*Fiercely*.] But I wanted to shock them! Here have they been despising me all the evening for nothing, and when that detestable girl with a voice like a white mouse sang her German jargon, praising her sky-high, I said I'd show them what singing means! And I did!

WARRINGTON. You certainly did! Ha! ha! You should have seen Julia's face when you boxed

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my ears. If the earth had opened her mouth and swallowed you up like Korah, Dathan and the other fellow, it couldn't have opened wider than Julia's.

ETHEL. Well, she can scowl if she likes. She can't hurt me now.

WARRINGTON. I'm not so sure of that.

ETHEL. She'll have to hurry up. We go to-morrow.

WARRINGTON. Ah, I didn't know. Well, there's nothing like exploding a bomb before you leave, eh ? Only it's not always safe—for the operator.

GEOFFREY [*re-entering with Mrs. CASSILIS*]. The carriage is round, Warrington. Lady Remenham's waiting.

WARRINGTON. The deuce she is ! [*Swallows whisky and soda.*] I must fly. Good-bye again. Good-bye, Mrs. Cassilis. A thousand thanks for a most interesting evening.

[WARRINGTON goes out with GEOFFREY. *Pause.* ETHEL stands sullen by fireplace.]

MRS. BORRIDGE [*yawning cavernously*]. Well, I think I shall turn in. Good night, Mrs. Cassilis. [*General handshakes.*] Coming, Eth ?

ETHEL. In a moment, mother.

[MRS. BORRIDGE *waddles out, with a parting smile from LADY MARCHMONT. GEOFFREY returns from seeing WARRINGTON off the premises. MRS. BORRIDGE wrings his hand affectionately in passing.*]

LADY MARCHMONT. I must be off too. And so must you, Mabel. You look tired out.

[*Kisses MRS. CASSILIS. GEOFFREY opens door for them.*]

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MABEL. I am a little tired. Good night.

[*Exeunt LADY MARCHMONT and MABEL.*]

GEOFFREY. Are you going, mother?

MRS. CASSILIS. Not at once. I've a couple of notes to write.

[*GEOFFREY crosses to fire. MRS. CASSILIS goes to writing-table centre, sits facing audience, and appears to begin to write notes. GEOFFREY goes up to ETHEL thoughtfully. A silence. Then he speaks in a low tone.*]

GEOFFREY. Ethel.

ETHEL. Yes.

[*Without looking up.*

GEOFFREY. Why did you sing that song to-night?

ETHEL [*with a sneer*]. To please Lady Remenham.

GEOFFREY. But, Ethel! That's not the sort of song Lady Remenham likes at all.

ETHEL [*impatiently*]. To shock her, then.

GEOFFREY. Ethel!

ETHEL. I think I managed it too!

GEOFFREY. I don't understand. You're joking, aren't you?

ETHEL. Joking!

GEOFFREY. I mean you didn't really do it on purpose to make Lady Remenham angry. I'm sure you didn't.

ETHEL [*very distinctly*]. I tell you I did it on purpose, deliberately, to shock Lady Remenham. I suppose I ought to know.

GEOFFREY [*astonished*]. But why? What made you do such a thing?

ETHEL [*savagely*]. I did it because I chose. Is that plain enough?

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GEOFFREY. Still, you must have had a *reason*.
[No answer. Suspiciously.] Did that fellow War-
rington tell you to sing it?

ETHEL [*snaps*]. No.

GEOFFREY. I thought perhaps . . . Anyhow,
promise me not to sing such a song again here.
[Silence.] You will promise?

ETHEL. Pooh!

GEOFFREY. Ethel, be reasonable. You must know
you can't go on doing that sort of thing here. When
we are married we shall live down here. You must
conform to the ideas of the people round you.
They may seem to you narrow and ridiculous, but
you can't alter them.

ETHEL. *You* don't think them narrow and
ridiculous, I suppose?

GEOFFREY. No. In this case I think they are
right. In many cases.

ETHEL. Sorry I can't agree with you.

GEOFFREY [*gently*]. Ethel, dear, don't let's quarrel
about a silly thing like this. If you are going to
marry me you *must* take my judgment on a matter
of this kind.

ETHEL [*defiantly*]. *Must* I?

GEOFFREY. Yes.

ETHEL. Then I won't. So there. I shall do
just exactly as I please. And if you don't like it
you can do the other thing. I'm not going to be
bullied by you.

GEOFFREY [*reasoning with her*]. My dear Ethel,
I'm sure I am never likely to bully you, or to do or
say anything that is unkind. But on a point like
this I can't give way.

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ETHEL. Very well, Geoff. If you think that you'd better break off our engagement, that's all.

GEOFFREY. Ethel ! [With horror.]

ETHEL [impatiently]. Well, there's nothing to make faces about, is there ?

GEOFFREY. You don't *mean* that. You don't mean you *want* our engagement to come to an end !

ETHEL. Never mind what I want. What do *you* want ?

GEOFFREY [astonished]. Of course I want it to go on. You know that.

ETHEL [gesture of despair]. Very well, then. You'd better behave accordingly. And now, if you've finished your lecture, I'll go to bed. Good night.

[Is going out, with only a nod to Mrs. CASSILIS, but she kisses her good night gently. GEOFFREY holds door open for her to go out, then goes and stands by fire. Mrs. CASSILIS, who has watched this scene while appearing to be absorbed in her notes, has risen to go to her room.]

Mrs. CASSILIS [cheerfully]. Well, I must be off too ! Good night, Geoffrey. [Kisses him.]

GEOFFREY [absently]. Good night, mother. [Mrs. CASSILIS goes slowly towards door.] Mother.

Mrs. CASSILIS [turning]. Yes, Geoff.

GEOFFREY. Mother, you don't think I was unreasonable in what I said to Ethel, do you ?

Mrs. CASSILIS [seems to think it over]. No, Geoff.

GEOFFREY. Or unkind ?

Mrs. CASSILIS. No, Geoff.

GEOFFREY. I was afraid. She took it so strangely.

Mrs. CASSILIS. She's rather over-excited to-night, I think. And tired, no doubt. [Encouragingly.] She'll be all right in the morning.

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GEOFFREY. You think I did right to speak to her about that song?

MRS. CASSILIS. Quite right, dear. Dear Ethel still has a little to learn, and, of course, it will take time. But we must be patient. Meantime, whenever she makes any little mistake, such as she made to-night, I think you should certainly speak to her about it. It will be such a help to her! I don't mean *scold* her, of course, but speak to her gently and kindly, just as you did to-night.

GEOFFREY [*despondently*]. It didn't seem to do any good.

MRS. CASSILIS. One never knows, dear. Good night.

[*Kisses him and goes out. He stands thoughtfully looking into the fire, and the curtain falls.*]

ACT IV

SCENE.—*The morning-room at Deynham. Time, after breakfast next day. A pleasant room, with French windows at the back open on to the terrace. The sun is shining brilliantly. There is a door to hall on the left. On the opposite side of the room is the fireplace. When the curtain rises MABEL and GEOFFREY are on the stage. GEOFFREY stands by the fireplace. MABEL is standing by the open window. GEOFFREY looks rather out of sorts and dull.*

MABEL. What a lovely day !

GEOFFREY [*absently*]. Not bad.

[*Pulls out cigarette case.*

MABEL. I'm sure you smoke too much, Geoffrey.

GEOFFREY [*smiles*]. I think not.

Enter MRS. CASSILIS from hall.

MRS. CASSILIS. Not gone out yet, dears ? Why, Mabel, you've not got your habit on.

MABEL. We're not going to ride this morning.

MRS. CASSILIS [*surprised*]. Not going to ride ?

MABEL. No. We've decided to stay at home to-day for a change.

MRS. CASSILIS. But why, dear ?

MABEL [*hesitating*]. I don't know. We just thought so. That's all.

MRS. CASSILIS. But you must have some reason.

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You and Geoffrey haven't been quarrelling, have you ?

MABEL [*laughing*]. Of course not.

MRS. CASSILIS. Then why aren't you going to ride ?

MABEL. Well, we thought Ethel might be dull if we left her all alone.

MRS. CASSILIS. Nonsense, dears. *I'll* look after Ethel. Go up and change, both of you, at once. Ethel would be dreadfully grieved if you gave up your ride for her. Ethel's not selfish. She would never allow you or Geoffrey to give up a pleasure on her account. [*Crosses to bell.*]

GEOFFREY. Well, Mabel, what do you say ?
[*Going to window.*] It is a ripping day.

MABEL. If Mrs. Cassilis thinks so.

MRS. CASSILIS. Of course I think so. Run away, dears, and get your things on. I'll tell them to send round the horses. [*Rings.*]

GEOFFREY. All right. Just for an hour. Come on, Mabel. I'll race you to the end of the passage.

[*They run out together, nearly upsetting footman who enters at the same moment.*]

MRS. CASSILIS. Lady Mabel and Mr. Geoffrey are going out riding. Tell them to send the horses round. And tell Hallard I want to see him about those roses. I'm going into the garden now.

FOOTMAN. Very well, madam.

[*Exit FOOTMAN. Mrs. Cassilis goes out into the garden. A moment later Mrs. BORRIDGE and ETHEL come in from the hall.*]

MRS. BORRIDGE [*looking round, then going to easy-chair.*] Mrs. Cassilis isn't here ?

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ETHEL [sulky]. I dare say she's with the house-keeper.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Very likely. [Picks up newspaper.] Give me a cushion, there's a good girl. [ETHEL does so.] Lady Marchmont isn't down yet, I suppose.

ETHEL. No. [Turns away.]

MRS. BORRIDGE [putting down paper]. What's the matter, dearie? You look awfully down.

ETHEL. Nothing.

[Goes to window and stares out into the sunlight.]

MRS. BORRIDGE. I wish Lady Marchmont came down to breakfast of a morning.

ETHEL [shrugs]. Do you?

MRS. BORRIDGE. Yes. It's dull without her. She and I are getting quite chummy.

ETHEL [irritably, swinging round]. Chummy! My dear mother, Lady Marchmont's only laughing at you.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Nonsense, Ethel. Laughing at me, indeed! I should like to see her!

ETHEL. That's just it, mother. You never will.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Pray, what do you mean by *that*, miss?

ETHEL [hopeless]. Oh, it doesn't matter.

[Goes to fireplace and leans arm on mantelpiece, depressed.]

MRS. BORRIDGE. Now you're sneering at me, and I won't 'ave it—have it. [Silence.] Do you 'ear?

ETHEL. Yes, I hear. [Stares down at fender.]

MRS. BORRIDGE. Very well, then. Don't let me

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'ave any more of it. [Grumbling to herself.] Laughing, indeed! [Pause. Recovering her composure.] Where's Geoffy?

ETHEL. I don't know.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Out riding, I suppose?

ETHEL. Very likely.

MRS. BORRIDGE. 'E only finished breakfast just before us.

ETHEL. He, mother.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Dear, dear, 'ow you do go on! You leave my aitches alone. *They're* all right.

ETHEL [sighs]. I wish they were! [Pause.] You've not forgotten we're going away to-day, mother?

MRS. BORRIDGE. To-day? 'Oo says so?

ETHEL. We were only invited for a week.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Were we, dearie? I don't remember.

ETHEL. *I* do. There's a train at 12.15, if you'll ask Mrs. Cassilis about the carriage.

MRS. BORRIDGE [flustered]. But I've not let Jane know. She won't be expecting us.

ETHEL. We can telegraph.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Can't we stay another day or two? I'm sure Mrs. Cassilis won't mind. And I'm very comfortable here.

ETHEL [firmly]. *No*, mother.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Why not?

ETHEL [exasperated]. In the first place because we haven't been asked. In the second, because I don't want to.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Don't want to?

ETHEL [snappishly]. No. I'm sick and tired of this place.

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MRS. BORRIDGE. Are you, dearie? I thought we were gettin' on first rate.

ETHEL. Did you? Anyhow, we're going, thank goodness, and that's enough. Don't forget to speak to Mrs. Cassilis. I'll go upstairs and pack.

[*As she is crossing the room to go out* MRS. CASSILIS *enters from garden and meets her. She stops. Mrs. Cassilis kisses her affectionately.*]

MRS. CASSILIS. Going out, Ethel dear? Good morning. [Greets MRS. BORRIDGE.]

ETHEL. Good morning.

MRS. CASSILIS [*putting her arm in ETHEL's and leading her up to window*]. Isn't it a lovely day? I woke at five. I believe it was the birds singing under my window.

ETHEL. Did you, Mrs. Cassilis?

Enter LADY MARCHMONT.

LADY MARCHMONT. Good morning, Adelaide. [Kisses her.] Late again, I'm afraid.

[*Shakes hands with ETHEL.*

MRS. CASSILIS [*sweetly*]. Another of your headaches, dear? I'm so sorry.

LADY MARCHMONT [*ignoring the rebuke*]. Good morning, Mrs. Borridge. I hope you slept well.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Sound as a bell. But, then, I was always a onener to sleep. My old man, when 'e was alive, used to say 'e never knew any one sleep like me. And snore! Why 'e declared it kep' 'im awake 'alf the night. But I never noticed it.

LADY MARCHMONT [*sweetly*]. That must have been a great consolation for Mr. Borridge.

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MRS. BORRIDGE. Your 'usband snore ?

LADY MARCHMONT [*laughing*]. No.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Thinks it's low per'aps. . . . They used to say snorin' comes from sleepin' with your mouth open, but *I* don't know. What do *you* think ?

LADY MARCHMONT. I really don't know, dear Mrs. Borridge. I must think it over.

[LADY MARCHMONT takes chair by MRS. BORRIDGE. They converse in dumb show. ETHEL and MRS. CASSILIS come down stage.]

MRS. CASSILIS. What a pretty blouse you've got on to-day, dear.

ETHEL. Is it, Mrs. Cassilis ?

MRS. CASSILIS. Sweetly pretty. It goes so well with your eyes. You've lovely eyes, you know.

ETHEL. Do you think so ?

MRS. CASSILIS. Of course. So does Geoff.

ETHEL [*disengaging herself*]. Oh, Geoff—— Well, I must go upstairs. [To MRS. BORRIDGE *in passing*.] Don't forget, mummy. [Exit ETHEL.]

MRS. BORRIDGE. What, dearie ? Oh yes. Ethel says we must be packin' our traps, Mrs. Cassilis.

MRS. CASSILIS [*startled*]. Packing ?

MRS. BORRIDGE. Yes. She says we mustn't outstay our welcome. She's proud, is my girlie.

MRS. CASSILIS [*with extreme cordiality*]. But you're not thinking of leaving us ? Oh, you mustn't do that. Geoff would be so disappointed. And so should I.

MRS. BORRIDGE. I don't *want* to go, I'm sure. Only Ethel said——

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MRS. CASSILIS. There must be some mistake. I counted on you for quite a long visit.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Ethel said we were only asked for a week.

MRS. CASSILIS. But that was before I really knew you, wasn't it? It's quite different now.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*purring delightedly*]. If you feel that, Mrs. Cassilis—

MRS. CASSILIS. Of course I feel it. I hope you'll stay quite a *long* time yet.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*complacent, appealing to LADY MARCHMONT, who nods sympathy*]. There! I told Ethel how it was.

MRS. CASSILIS [*anxious*]. Ethel doesn't *want* to go, does she?

MRS. BORRIDGE. Oh *no*. She'd be delighted to stop on. Only she thought—

MRS. CASSILIS [*determined to leave Mrs. BORRIDGE no opportunity to hedge*]. Very well, then. That's settled. You'll stay with us till Geoff and I go to Scotland. That won't be till the middle of August. You promise?

MRS. BORRIDGE. Thank you, Mrs. Cassilis. I call that *real* hospitable! [*Rising.*] And now I'll run upstairs and tell my girl, or she'll be packing my black satin before I've time to stop her. She's so 'asty. And I always say nothing spoils things like packing, especially satins. They do crush so.

[*Mrs. BORRIDGE waddles out. As soon as the door closes Mrs. CASSILIS heaves a deep sigh of relief, showing how alarmed she had been lest the BORRIDGES should really take their departure. For a moment*

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there is silence. Then LADY MARCHMONT, who has watched this scene with full appreciation of its ironic humour, speaks.]

LADY MARCHMONT. How you fool that old woman !

MRS. CASSILIS. So do you, dear.

LADY MARCHMONT. Yes. You'll make me as great a hypocrite as yourself before you're done. When you first began I was shocked at you. But now I feel a dreadful spirit of emulation stealing over me.

MRS. CASSILIS [*grimly*]. There's always a satisfaction in doing a thing well, isn't there ?

LADY MARCHMONT. You must feel it, then.

MRS. CASSILIS. Thanks.

LADY MARCHMONT [*puzzled*]. Do you really want these dreadful people to stay all that time ?

MRS. CASSILIS. Certainly. And to come back, if necessary, in October.

LADY MARCHMONT. Good heavens ! Why ?

MRS. CASSILIS [*sitting*]. My dear Margaret, as long as that woman and her daughter are here we *may* get Geoffrey out of their clutches. I thought we should manage it last night. Last night was a terrible disillusionment for him, poor boy. But I was wrong. It was too soon.

LADY MARCHMONT. By the way, what did that amusing wretch Major Warrington advise ?

MRS. CASSILIS. I didn't consult him. I'd no opportunity. Besides, I couldn't have trusted him. He might have gone over to the enemy.

LADY MARCHMONT. Yes. He was evidently attracted to the girl.

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MRS. CASSILIS. I suppose so. Major Warrington isn't fastidious where women are concerned.

LADY MARCHMONT. Still, he knew, of course.

MRS. CASSILIS. Only what Lady Remenham would have told him. However, his visit wasn't altogether wasted, I think.

LADY MARCHMONT. That song, you mean?

MRS. CASSILIS. Yes. He gave poor Ethel a glimpse of the Paradise she is turning her back on for ever. London, music-hall songs, racketty bachelors. And that made her reckless. The contrast between Major Warrington and, say, our dear Rector, can hardly fail to have gone home to her.

[*Further conversation is interrupted by the entrance of ETHEL, in the worst of tempers. MRS. CASSILIS is on her guard at once.*]

ETHEL [*bursting out*]. Mrs. Cassilis—

MRS. CASSILIS [*very sweetly, rising and going to her*]. Ethel, dear, what is this I hear? You're not going to run away from us?

ETHEL [*doggedly*]. Indeed we must, Mrs. Cassilis. You've had us for a week. We really mustn't stay any longer.

MRS. CASSILIS. But, my dear, it's *delightful* to have you.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*who has followed hard after her daughter and now enters, flushed and rather breathless*]. There, you see, dearie! What did I tell you?

MRS. CASSILIS. Geoff would be *terribly* distressed if you went away. He'd think I hadn't made you comfortable. He'd scold me dreadfully.

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ETHEL. I don't think Geoff will care.

[MRS. BORRIDGE appeals mutely for sympathy to LADY MARCHMONT, who hastens to give it in full measure.]

MRS. CASSILIS [great solicitude]. My dear, you've not had any little difference with Geoff? Any quarrel?

ETHEL. No.

MRS. CASSILIS. I was so afraid——

ETHEL. Still, we oughtn't to plant ourselves on you in this way.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Plant ourselves! Really, dearie, how can you say such things? Plant ourselves!

ETHEL. Oh, do be quiet, mother. [Stamps her foot.

MRS. CASSILIS [soothing her]. Anyhow, you can't possibly go to-day. The carriage has gone to Branscombe, and the other horse has cast a shoe. And to-morrow there's a dinner-party at Milverton. You'll stay for that?

ETHEL. You're very kind, Mrs. Cassilis, but——

MRS. CASSILIS [leaving her no time to withdraw]. That's right, my dear. You'll stay. And next week we'll have some young people over to meet you, and you shall dance all the evening.

MRS. BORRIDGE. There, Ethel!

ETHEL [hopeless]. Very well. If you really wish it.

MRS. CASSILIS. Of course I wish it. I'm so glad. I shan't be able to part with you for a long time yet.

[Kisses her tenderly. But ETHEL seems too depressed to answer to these blandishments.]

LADY MARCHMONT [under her breath]. Really, Adelaide!

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MRS. CASSILIS [sweetly]. Into the garden, did you say, Margaret ? [Taking her up towards window.] Very well. The sun is tempting, isn't it ?

[MRS. CASSILIS and her sister sail out. ETHEL and her mother remain, the former in a condition of frantic exasperation.]

ETHEL. Well, mother, you've done it !

MRS. BORRIDGE [snapping. She feels she is being goaded unduly]. Done what, dearie ?

ETHEL [impatiently]. Oh, you know.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Do you mean about staying on here ? But what could I do ? Mrs. Cassilis wouldn't let us go. You saw that yourself.

ETHEL. You might have stood out.

MRS. BORRIDGE. I did, dearie. I stood out as long as ever I could. But she wouldn't hear of our goin'. You saw that yourself.

ETHEL. Well, mother, don't say I didn't warn you, that's all.

MRS. BORRIDGE. Warn me, dearie ?

ETHEL [breaking out]. That I was tired of this place. Sick and tired of it ! That it was time we were moving.

MRS. BORRIDGE [placidly]. Is that all ? I'll remember. [Pause.] How far did you get with the packing ?

ETHEL [impatiently]. I don't know.

MRS. BORRIDGE. You hadn't packed my black satin ?

ETHEL. I don't know. Yes, I think so. I'm not sure. Don't worry, mother.

MRS. BORRIDGE [lamentably]. It'll be simply

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covered with creases. I know it will. Run up at once, there's a good girl, and shake it out.

ETHEL [*snaps*]. Oh, bother !

MRS. BORRIDGE. Then I must. How tiresome girls are ! Always in the tantrums !

[*Poor old Mrs. BORRIDGE ambles out grumbling. ETHEL, left alone, sits scowling furiously at the carpet and biting her nails. There is a considerable pause, during which her rage and weariness are silently expressed. Then GEOFFREY and MABEL enter, quite cheerful, in riding things. They make a curious contrast to the almost tragic figure of sulkiness which meets their eyes.*]

GEOFFREY [*cheerfully*]. Hullo, Ethel ! There you are, are you ?

ETHEL [*sulky*]. You can see me, I suppose.

MABEL. We didn't get our ride after all.

ETHEL. Didn't you ? [Turns away.]

MABEL. No. Basil has strained one of his sinews, poor darling. He'll have to lie up for a day or two.

GEOFFREY. Isn't it hard luck ? It would have been such a glorious day for a ride. We were going round by Long Winton and up to Tenterden's farm and—

ETHEL [*snaps*]. You needn't trouble to tell me. I don't want to hear.

[*There is an awkward pause after this explosion.*

MABEL. I think I'll go up and change my habit, Geoff.

[*GEOFFREY nods, and MABEL goes out. GEOFFREY after a moment goes up to ETHEL, and lays a hand gently on her shoulder.*]

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GEOFFREY. What is it, Ethel? Is anything the matter?

ETHEL [*shaking him off fiercely*]. Please don't touch me.

GEOFFREY. Something has happened. What is it?

ETHEL [*savagely*]. Nothing's happened. Nothing ever does happen *here*.

[GEOFFREY tries to take her hand. She pulls it pettishly away. He slightly shrugs his shoulders. A long pause. He rises slowly and turns towards door.]

ETHEL [*stopping him*]. Geoff!

GEOFFREY. Yes. [Does not turn his head.]

ETHEL. I want to break off our engagement.

GEOFFREY [*swinging round, astonished, and not for a moment taking her seriously*]. My dear girl!

ETHEL. I think it would be better. Better for both of us.

GEOFFREY [*still rallying her*]. Might one ask why?

ETHEL. For many reasons. Oh, don't let us go into all that. Just say you release me and there's an end.

GEOFFREY [*more serious*]. My dear Ethel. What is the matter? Aren't you well?

ETHEL [*impatiently*]. I'm perfectly well.

GEOFFREY. I don't think you are. You look quite flushed. I wish you'd take more exercise. You'd be ever so much better.

ETHEL [*goaded to frenzy by this well-meant suggestion, GEOFFREY's panacea for all human ills*]. Geoffrey, you're simply maddening. Do please understand that I know when I'm well and when I'm ill. There's

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nothing whatever the matter with me. I believe you think everything in life would go right if only every one took a cold bath every morning and spent the rest of the day shooting partridges.

GEOFFREY [*quite simply*]. Well, there's a lot in that, isn't there?

ETHEL. Rubbish!

GEOFFREY [*struck by a brilliant idea*]. It's not that silly business about the riding again, is it?

ETHEL [*almost hysterical with exasperation*]. Oh, no! no! *Please* believe that I'm not a child, and that I know what I'm saying. *I want to break off our engagement.* I don't think we're suited to each other.

GEOFFREY [*piqued*]. This is rather sudden, isn't it?

ETHEL [*sharply*]. How do you know it's sudden?

GEOFFREY. But isn't it?

ETHEL. No. It's not.

GEOFFREY [*struck by a thought*]. Ethel, has my mother——?

ETHEL. Your mother has nothing whatever to do with it.

GEOFFREY. She hasn't said anything?

ETHEL. Your mother has been everything that's kind and good. In fact, if it hadn't been for her I think I should have broken it off before. But I didn't want to hurt her.

[GEOFFREY rises, and paces the room up and down for a moment in thought. Then he turns to her again.]

GEOFFREY. Ethel, you mustn't come to a decision like this hastily. You must take time to consider.

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ETHEL. Thank you. My mind is quite made up.

GEOFFREY. Still, you might think it over for a day or two—a week, perhaps. It [*hesitates*] . . . it wouldn't be fair of me to take you at your word in this way.

ETHEL. Why not?

GEOFFREY [*hesitates*]. You might—regret it afterwards.

ETHEL [*with a short laugh*]. You're very modest.

GEOFFREY [*nettled*]. Oh, I'm not vain enough to imagine that you would find anything to regret in *me*. *I'm* a commonplace fellow enough. But there are other things which a girl has to consider in marriage, aren't there? Position. Money. If you broke off our engagement now, mightn't you regret these later on [*slight touch of bitterness*], however little you regret *me*?

ETHEL [*touched*]. Geoff, dear, I'm sorry I hurt you. I didn't mean to. You're a good fellow. Far too good for me. And I know you mean it kindly when you ask me to take time, and all that. But my mind's quite made up. Don't let's say any more about it.

GEOFFREY [*slowly, and a little sadly*]. You don't love me any more, then?

ETHEL. No. [*Decisively.*] I don't love you any more. Perhaps I never did love you really, Geoff. I don't know.

GEOFFREY. I loved *you*, Ethel.

ETHEL. I wonder.

GEOFFREY. You know I did.

ETHEL. You thought you did. But that's not always the same thing, is it? Many a girl takes a

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man's fancy for a moment. Yet people say one only loves once, don't they? [Pause.]

GEOFFREY [hesitating again]. Ethel . . . I don't know how to say it. . . . You'll laugh at me again. . . . But . . . you're sure you're not doing this on my account?

ETHEL. On *your* account?

GEOFFREY. Yes. To spare me. Because you think I ought to marry in my own class, as Lady Remenham would say?

ETHEL. No.

GEOFFREY. Quite sure?

ETHEL [nods]. Quite.

[Turns away.]

GEOFFREY [frankly puzzled]. Then I *can't* understand it!

ETHEL [turning on him impatiently]. My dear Geoff, is it impossible for you to understand that I don't *want* to marry you? That if I married you I should be bored to death? That I *loathe* the life down here among your highly respectable friends? That if I had to *live* here with you I should yawn myself into my grave in six months?

GEOFFREY [astonished]. Don't you *like* Deynham?

ETHEL. No. I *detest* it. Oh, it's pretty enough, I suppose, and the fields are very green, and the view from Milverton Hill is much admired. And you live all alone in a great park, and you've horses and dogs, and a butler and two footmen. But that's not enough for *me*. I want life, people, *lots* of people. If I lived down here I should go blue-mouldy in three weeks. I'm town-bred, a true cockney. I want streets and shops and gas lamps.

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I don't want your carriages and pair. Give me a penny omnibus.

GEOFFREY. Ethel!

ETHEL. Now you're shocked. It *is* vulgar, isn't it? But *I'm* vulgar. And I'm not ashamed of it. Now you know.

[*Another pause. GEOFFREY, in pained surprise, ponders deeply. At last he speaks.*]

GEOFFREY. It's all over, then?

ETHEL [*nodding flippantly*]. All over and done with. I surrender my claim to everything, the half of your worldly goods, of your mother's worldly goods, of your house, your park, your men-servants and maid-servants, your aristocratic relations. Don't let's forget your aristocratic relations. I surrender them all. There's my hand on it. [Stretches it out.]

GEOFFREY [*pained*]. Don't, Ethel.

ETHEL [*with genuine surprise*]. My dear Geoff, you don't mean to say you're *sorry*! You ought to be flinging your cap in the air at regaining your liberty. Why, I believe there are tears in your eyes! Actually tears! Let me look.

[*Turns his face to her.*]

GEOFFREY [*pulling it away sulkily*]. You don't suppose a fellow *likes* being thrown over like this, do you?

ETHEL. Vanity, my dear Geoff. Mere vanity.

GEOFFREY [*hotly*]. It's *not*!

ETHEL [*suddenly serious*]. Geoff, do you *want* our engagement to go on? Do you *want* to marry me still? [He turns to her impulsively.] Do you *love* me still? [Checks him.] No, Geoff. Think before you speak. On your honour! [GEOFFREY is silent.]

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There, you see ! Come, dear, cheer up. It's best as it is. Give me a kiss. The last one. [She goes to GEOFFREY and holds up her face to be kissed. He kisses her on the forehead.] And now I'll run upstairs and tell mother. [Laughs.] Poor mother ! Won't she make a shine !

[ETHEL goes out recklessly. GEOFFREY, left alone, looks round the room in a dazed way. Takes out cigarette-case automatically, goes to writing-table for match. Just as he is lighting cigarette MRS. CASSILIS enters from garden, followed a moment later by LADY MARCHMONT. He throws cigarette away unlighted.]

MRS. CASSILIS. All alone, Geoffrey ?

GEOFFREY. Yes, mother.

MRS. CASSILIS. Where's Ethel ?

GEOFFREY. Mother—Ethel's . . . [Sees LADY MARCHMONT. Pause.] Good morning, - Aunt Margaret.

LADY MARCHMONT. Good morning.

MRS. CASSILIS. Well, dear ?

GEOFFREY. Mother [plunging into his subject], a terrible thing has happened. Ethel was here a moment ago, and she has broken off our engagement.

LADY MARCHMONT. Broken it off !

MRS. CASSILIS [immensely sympathetic]. Broken it off, dear ? Surely not ?

GEOFFREY. Yes.

MRS. CASSILIS. Oh, poor Geoffrey. [Going to him.] Did she say why ?

GEOFFREY [dully]. Only that it had all been a mistake. She was tired of it all, and didn't like the country, and—that's all, I think.

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MRS. CASSILIS [*anxious*]. My poor boy. And I thought her so happy with us. [Laying hand caressingly on his shoulder as he sits with head bowed.] You don't think we've been to blame—I've been to blame—in any way, do you? Perhaps we ought to have amused her more.

GEOFFREY. Not you, mother. You've always been sweet and good to her. Always. She said so.

MRS. CASSILIS. I'm glad of that, dear.

[Enter Mrs. BORRIDGE, furiously angry, followed by ETHEL, vainly trying to detain or silence her. GEOFFREY retreats up stage, where Mrs. BORRIDGE for a moment does not notice him.]

MRS. BORRIDGE [*raging*]. Where's Geoff? Leave me alone, Ethel. Where's Geoff?

ETHEL. He's not here, mother. And Mrs. Cassilis is. Do be quiet.

GEOFFREY [*coming between them*]. I'm here. What is it, Mrs. Borridge?

MRS. BORRIDGE. Oh, Geoffy, what is this Ethel's been telling me? You haven't really broke off your engagement, have you?

ETHEL. Nonsense, mother. I broke it off, as I told you.

MRS. BORRIDGE. But you didn't mean it, dearie. It's all a mistake. Just a little tiff.

ETHEL [*firmly*]. No!

MRS. BORRIDGE [*obstinately*]. Yes, it is. It'll blow over. You wouldn't be so unkind to poor Geoffy.

ETHEL. Mother, don't be a fool. It doesn't take anybody in. Come upstairs and let's get on with our packing.

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MRS. BORRIDGE [*stamps foot*]. Be quiet, Ethel, when I tell you. Lady Marchmont, won't *you* speak to her? Undutiful girl. I should like to *whip* her!

[*ETHEL turns away in despair.*]

LADY MARCHMONT [*soothingly*]. Ah, well, dear Mrs. Borridge, perhaps young people know best about these things.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*excited and angry*]. Know best! know best! How should they know best? They don't know *anything*. They're as ignorant as they are uppish. [*Growing tearful.*] And to think 'ow I've worked for that girl! 'Ow I've slaved for 'er, denied myself for 'er. [*Breaking down.*] I did so want 'er to be respectable. I 'aven't always been respectable myself, and I know the value of it.

[*Subsides into chair, almost hysterical, and no longer realising what she is saying.*]

ETHEL. Oh, hush, mother!

MRS. BORRIDGE [*angry again*]. I won't 'ush, so there! I'm your mother, and I won't be trod on. I find some one to marry you—a better match than ever you'll find for yourself, miss—and this is 'ow I'm treated! [*Begins to cry.*]

ETHEL [*taking her arm*]. Mother, mother, do come away.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*breaking down altogether*]. And now to 'ave to begin all over again. And young men ain't so green as they used to be. Not by a long way. They're cunning most of them. They take a deal of catchin'. And I'm gettin' an old woman. Oh, she might 'ave spared me this.

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MRS. CASSILIS [*almost sorry for her*]. Mrs. Borridge
—Mrs. Borridge.

MRS. BORRIDGE [*refusing to be comforted*]. But she's no natural affection. That's what it is. She doesn't love 'er mother. She's 'eadstrong and wilful, and never paid the least attention to what I told 'er. [*Burst of tears.*] But I do think she might 'ave let 'im break it off. Then there'd 'ave been a breach of promise, and that's always something. That's what I always say to girls: "Leave *them* to break it off, dearies. And then there'll be a breach of promise, *and damages*." That's if you've got something on paper. But [*fresh burst of tears*] she never *would* get anything on paper. She never paid the least regard to her old mother. She's an undutiful girl, and that's 'ow it is.

[*Goes off into incoherent sobs.*]

BUTLER. Lady Remenham.

MRS. CASSILIS [*rising hastily*]. The drawing-room, Watson.

[*She is, however, too late to stop Watson from showing in Lady Remenham.*]

LADY REMENHAM [*sailing in, with breezy cheerfulness*]. How do you do, Adelaide? How do you do, Margaret? I've just driven Algernon to the station, and I thought I'd leave this for you as I passed.

[*Gives book.*]

MRS. BORRIDGE. She's an undutiful daughter. That's what she is. [Snorting and sobbing.]

LADY REMENHAM [*perceiving for the first time that something unusual is going on*]. Eh?

MRS. CASSILIS. Mrs. Borridge is not quite herself just now. Dear Ethel has decided that she does

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not wish to continue her engagement to my son, and Mrs. Borridge has only just heard the news.

LADY REMENHAM [*scarcely able to believe her ears*]. Not wish——!

MRS. CASSILIS [*hastily, checking her*]. No. This has naturally upset us all very much. It was so very sudden.

LADY REMENHAM. Well, I must say——

[*Luckily she does not do so, but takes refuge in silence.*]

MRS. BORRIDGE [*burst of grief*]. Oh, why didn't she get something on paper? Letters is best. Men are that slippy! I always told her to get something on paper. [Breaks down completely.]

ETHEL. Come away, mother. [Takes her firmly by the arm.] Will you please order the carriage, Mrs. Cassilis?

[Leads MRS. BORRIDGE off, sobbing and gulping to the last.]

LADY REMENHAM [*sitting down, with a triumphant expression on her amiable countenance*]. Geoffrey, will you tell the coachman to drive round to the stables? I shall stay to luncheon.

[*It is impossible adequately to represent the tone in which LADY REMENHAM announces this intention. It is that of a victorious general occupying the field, from which he has beaten the enemy with bag and baggage. Luckily, GEOFFREY is too depressed to notice anything. He goes out without a word—and the curtain falls.*]

THE CONSTANT LOVER
A COMEDY OF YOUTH IN ONE ACT

“As of old when the world’s heart was lighter”

CHARACTERS

EVELYN RIVERS (18 OR 20).

CECIL HARBURTON (25).

THE CONSTANT LOVER

Before the curtain rises the orchestra will play the Woodland Music (cuckoo) from Hansel and Gretel, and possibly some of the Greig Pastoral Music from "Peer Gynt," or some Gabriel Fauré.

SCENE. *A glade in a wood, with a great beech-tree, the branches of which overhang the stage, the brilliant sunlight filtering through them. The sky where it can be seen through the branches is a cloudless blue.*

[*When the curtain rises CECIL HARBURTON is discovered sitting on the ground under the tree, leaning his back against its trunk and reading a book. He wears a straw hat and the lightest of grey flannel suits. The chattering of innumerable small birds is heard while the curtain is still down, and this grows louder as it rises, and we find ourselves in the wood. Presently a wood pigeon cooed in the distance. Then a thrush begins to sing in the tree above CECIL's head and is answered by another. After a moment CECIL looks up.*]]

CECIL. By Jove, that's jolly! [Listens for a moment, then returns to his book. Suddenly a cuckoo begins to call insistently. After a moment or two he looks up again.] Cuckoo too! Bravo! [Again he returns to his book.]

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[A moment later EVELYN RIVERS enters. She also wears the lightest of summer dresses, as it is a cloudless day in May. On her head is a shady straw hat. As she approaches the tree a twig snaps under her foot and CECIL looks up. He jumps to his feet, closing book, and advances to her eagerly, holding out his right hand, keeping the book in his left.]

CECIL [reproachfully]. Here you are at last !

EVELYN. At last ?

CECIL. Yes. You're awfully late.

[Looks at watch.

EVELYN. Am I ?

CECIL. You know you are. I expected you at three.

EVELYN. Why ? I never said I'd come at three. Indeed, I never *said* I'd come at all.

CECIL. No. But it's always been three.

EVELYN. Has it ?

CECIL. And now it's half-past. I consider I've been cheated out of a whole half-hour.

EVELYN. I couldn't help it. Mother kept me. She wanted the roses done in the drawing-room.

CECIL. How stupid of Mrs. Rivers !

EVELYN. Mr. Harburton !

CECIL. What's the matter ?

EVELYN. I don't think you *ought* to call my mother stupid.

CECIL. Why not—if she is stupid ? Most parents are stupid, by the way. I've noticed it before. Mrs. Rivers ought to have thought of the roses

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earlier. The morning is the proper time to gather roses. Didn't you tell her that ?

EVELYN. I'm afraid I couldn't very well. You see it was really I who ought to have thought of the roses ! I always do them. But this morning I forgot.

CECIL. I see. [Turning towards the tree.] Well, sit down now you are here. Isn't it a glorious day ?

EVELYN [hesitating]. I don't believe I ought to sit down.

CECIL [turns to her]. Why not ? There's no particular virtue about standing, is there ? I hate standing. So let's sit down and be comfortable.

[She sits, so does he. She sits on the bank under the tree, to the left of it. He sits below the bank to the right of it.]

EVELYN. But *ought* I to be sitting here with you ? That's what I mean. It's—not as if I really *knew* you, is it ?

CECIL. Not *know* me ?

[The chatter of birds dies away.

EVELYN. Not properly—we've never even been introduced. We just met quite by chance here in the wood.

CECIL. Yes. [Ecstatically.] What a glorious chance !

EVELYN. Still, I'm sure mother wouldn't approve.

CECIL. And *you* say Mrs. Rivers isn't stupid !

EVELYN [laughing]. I expect most people would agree with her. Most people would say you oughtn't to have spoken to a girl you didn't know like that.

The Constant Lover

CECIL. Oh, come, I only asked my way back to the inn.

EVELYN. There was no harm in asking your way, of course. But then we began talking of other things. And then we sat down under this tree. And we've sat talking under this tree every afternoon since. And that was a week ago.

CECIL. Well, it's such an awfully jolly tree.

EVELYN. I don't know *what* mother would say if she heard of it.

CECIL. Would it be something unpleasant ?

EVELYN [ruefully]. I'm afraid it would.

CECIL. How fortunate you don't know it then.

EVELYN [pondering]. Still, if I really *oughtn't* to be here. . . . Do you think I *oughtn't* to be here ?

CECIL. I don't think I should go into that if I were you. Sensible people think of what they want to do, not of what they *ought* to do, otherwise they get confused. And then of course they do the wrong thing.

EVELYN. But if I do what I *oughtn't*, I generally find I'm sorry for it afterwards.

CECIL. Not half so sorry as you would have been if you hadn't done it. In this world the things one regrets are the things one hasn't done. For instance, if I hadn't spoken to you a week ago here in the wood, I should have regretted it all my life.

EVELYN. Would you ? [He nods.] Really and truly ?

CECIL [nods]. Really and truly.

[He lays his hand on hers for a moment, she lets it rest there. Cuckoo calls loudly once or twice—she draws her hand away.]

The Constant Lover

EVELYN. There's the cuckoo.

[CECIL rises and sits on the bank by her side, leaning against tree.]

CECIL. Yes. Isn't he jolly? Don't you love cuckoos?

EVELYN. They *are* rather nice.

CECIL. Aren't they! And such clever beggars. Most birds are fools—like most people. As soon as they're grown up they go and get married, and then the rest of their lives are spent in bringing up herds of children and wondering how on earth to pay their school-bills. Your cuckoo sees the folly of all that. No school-bills for *her*! No nursing the baby! She just flits from hedgerow to hedgerow flirting with other cuckoos. And when she lays an egg she lays it in some one else's nest, which saves all the trouble of housekeeping. Oh, a wise bird!

EVELYN [pouting, looking away from him]. I don't know that I *do* like cuckoos so much after all. They sound to me rather selfish.

CECIL. Yes. But so sensible! The duck's a wise bird too in her way. [She turns to him.] But *her* way's different from the cuckoo's. [Matter-of-fact.] She always *treads* on *her* eggs.

EVELYN. Clumsy creature!

CECIL. Not a bit. She does it on purpose. You see, it's much less trouble than *sitting* on them. As soon as she's laid an egg she raises one foot absent-mindedly and gives a warning quack. Whereupon the farmer rushes up, takes it away, and puts it under some wretched hen, who has to do the sitting for her. I call that genius!

The Constant Lover

EVELYN. Genius!

CECIL. Yes. Genius is the infinite capacity for making other people take pains.

EVELYN. How can you say that?

CECIL. I didn't. Carlyle did.

EVELYN. I don't believe he said anything of the kind. And I don't believe ducks are clever one bit. They don't look clever.

CECIL. That's part of their cleverness. In this world if one *is* wise one should look like a fool. It puts people off their guard. That's what the duck does.

EVELYN. Well, I think ducks are horrid, and cuckoos too. And I believe most birds *like* bringing up their chickens and feeding them and looking after them.

CECIL. They do. That's the extraordinary part of it. They spend their whole lives building nests and laying eggs and hatching them. And when the chickens come out the father has to fuss round finding worms. And the nest's abominably over-crowded and the babies are perpetually squalling, and that drives the husband to the public-house, and it's all as uncomfortable as the Devil—

EVELYN. Mr. Harburton!

CECIL. Well, *I* shouldn't like it. In fact, I call it fatuous.

[EVELYN is leaning forward pondering this philosophy with a slightly puckered brow—a slight pause.]

I say, *you* don't look a bit comfortable like that. Lean back against the tree. It's a first-rate tree. That's why I chose it.

The Constant Lover

EVELYN [*tries and fails*]. I can't. My hat gets in the way.

CECIL. Take it off then.

EVELYN. I think I will. [*Does so.*] That's better.

[*Leans back luxuriously against the trunk ; puts her hat down on bank beside her.*]

CECIL. Much better. [*Looks at her with frank admiration.*] By Jove, you *do* look jolly without your hat !

EVELYN. Do I ?

CECIL. Yes. Your hair's such a jolly colour. I noticed it the first time I saw you. You had your hat off then, you know. You were walking through the wood fanning yourself with it. And directly I caught sight of you the sun came out and simply flooded your hair with light. And there was the loveliest pink flush on your cheeks, and your eyes were soft and shining—

EVELYN [*troubled*]. Mr. Harburton, you mustn't say things to me like that.

CECIL. Mustn't I ? Why not ? Don't you like being told you look jolly ?

EVELYN [*naïvely*]. I do *like* it, of course. But *ought* you . . . ?

CECIL [*groans*]. Oh, it's *that* again.

EVELYN. I mean it's not *right* for men to say those things to girls.

CECIL. I don't see that—if they're true. You *are* pretty and your eyes *are* soft and your cheeks—why they're flushing at this moment ! [*Triumphant.*] Why shouldn't I say it ?

EVELYN. Please ! . . .

[*She stops, and her eyes fill with tears.*

The Constant Lover

CECIL [*much concerned*]. Miss Rivers, what's the matter ? Why, I believe you're crying !

EVELYN [*sniffing suspiciously*]. I'm . . . not.

CECIL. You are, I can see the tears. Have I said anything to hurt you ? What is it ? Tell me.

[*Much concerned*.]

EVELYN [*recovering herself by an effort*]. It's nothing. Nothing really. I'm all right now. Only you won't say things to me like that again, will you ? Promise.

[*Taking out handkerchief*.]

CECIL. I promise . . . if you really wish it. And now dry your eyes and let's be good children. That's what my nurse used to say when my sister and I quarrelled. Shall I dry them for you ?

[*Takes her handkerchief and does so tenderly*.]

EVELYN [*with a little gulp*]. Thank you. [*Takes away handkerchief*]. How absurd you are !

[*Puts it away*.]

CECIL. Thank you !

[EVELYN moves down, sitting at the bottom of the bank, a little below him.]

EVELYN. Did you often quarrel with your sister ?

CECIL. Perpetually. *And* my brothers. Didn't you ?

EVELYN. I never had any.

CECIL. Poor little kid. You must have been rather lonely.

EVELYN [*matter-of-fact*]. There was always Reggie.

CECIL. Reggie ?

EVELYN. My cousin, Reggie Townsend. He lived with us when we were children. His parents were in India.

The Constant Lover

CECIL [*matter-of-fact*]. So he used to quarrel with you instead.

EVELYN [*shocked*]. Oh no ! We *never* quarrelled. At least, Reggie never did. *I* did sometimes.

CECIL. How dull ! There's no good in quarrelling if people won't quarrel back.

EVELYN. I don't think there's *any good* in quarrelling at all.

CECIL. Oh yes, there is. There's the making it up again.

EVELYN. Was that why you used to quarrel with your sister ?

CECIL. I expect so, though I didn't know it, of course—then. I used to tease her awfully, I remember, and pull her hair. She had awfully jolly hair. Like yours—oh ! I forgot, I mustn't say that. Used you to pull Reggie's hair ?

EVELYN [*laughing*]. I'm afraid I did sometimes.

CECIL. I was sure of it. How long was he with you ?

EVELYN. Till he went to Winchester. And of course he used to be with us in the holidays after that. And he comes to us now whenever he can get away for a few days. He's in his uncle's office in the city. He'll be a partner some day.

CECIL. Poor chap !

EVELYN. Poor chap ! Mother says he's very fortunate.

CECIL. She would. Parents always think it very fortunate when young men have to go to an office every day. I know mine do.

EVELYN. Do you go to an office every day ?

CECIL. No.

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EVELYN [*with dignity*]. Then I don't think you can know much about it, can you ?

CECIL [*carelessly*]. I know too much. That's why I don't go.

EVELYN. What *do* you do ?

CECIL. I don't do anything. I'm at the Bar.

EVELYN. If you're at the Bar, why are you down here instead of up in London working ?

CECIL. Because if I were in London I might possibly get a brief. It's not likely, but it's possible. And if I got a brief I should have to be mugging in chambers, or wrangling in a stuffy court, instead of sitting under a tree in the shade with you.

EVELYN. But *ought* you to waste your time like that ?

CECIL [*genuinely shocked*]. *Waste* my time ! To sit under a tree—a really nice tree like this—talking to *you*. You call that *wasting time* !

EVELYN. Isn't it ?

CECIL. No ! To sit in a frowsy office adding up figures when the sky's blue and the weather's heavenly, *that's* wasting time. The only real way in which one can waste time is not to enjoy it, to spend one's day blinking at a ledger and never notice how beautiful the world is, and how good it is to be alive. To be only making money when one might be making love, *that* is wasting time !

EVELYN. How earnestly you say that !

[CECIL *leans forward—close to her.*]

CECIL. Isn't it true ?

EVELYN [*troubled*]. Perhaps it is.

[*Looks away from him.*]

The Constant Lover

CECIL. You know it is. Every one knows it. Only people won't admit it. [Leaning towards her and looking into her eyes.] You know it at this moment.

EVELYN [returning his gaze slowly]. I think I do.

[For a long moment they look into each other's eyes. Then he takes her two hands, draws her slowly towards him and kisses her gently on the lips.]

CECIL. Ah !

[Sigh of satisfaction. He releases her hands and leans back against the tree again.]

EVELYN [sadly]. Oh, Mr. Harburton, you oughtn't to have done that !

CECIL. Why not ?

EVELYN. Because . . . [Hesitates.] Because you oughtn't. . . . Because men oughtn't to kiss girls.

CECIL [scandalised]. Oughtn't to kiss girls ! What nonsense ! What on earth were girls made for if not to be kissed ?

EVELYN. I mean they oughtn't . . . unless . . .

[Looking away.]

CECIL [puzzled]. Unless ?

EVELYN [looking down]. Unless they *love* them.

CECIL [relieved]. But I *do* love you. Of course I love you. That's why I kissed you.

[A thrush is heard calling in the distance.]

EVELYN. Really ?

[CECIL nods. EVELYN sighs contentedly.]

That makes it all right then.

CECIL. I should think it did. And as it's all right I may kiss you again, mayn't I ?

The Constant Lover

EVELYN [*shyly*]. If you like.

CECIL. You darling ! [Takes her in his arms and kisses her long and tenderly.] Lean your head on my shoulder, you'll find it awfully comfortable. [He leans back against the tree.]

[She does so.]

There ! Is that all right ?

EVELYN. Quite. [Sigh of contentment.]

CECIL. How pretty your hair is ! I always thought your hair lovely. And it's as soft as silk. I always knew it would be like silk. [Strokes it.] Do you like me to stroke your hair ?

EVELYN. Yes !

CECIL. Sensible girl ! [Pause ; he laughs happily.] I say, what am I to call you ? Do you know, I don't even know your Christian name yet ?

EVELYN. Don't you ?

CECIL. No. You've never told me. What is it ? Mine's Cecil.

EVELYN. Mine's Evelyn.

CECIL. Evelyn ? Oh, I don't like Evelyn. It's rather a *stodgy* sort of name. I think I shall call you Eve. Does any one else call you Eve ?

EVELYN. No.

CECIL. Then I shall certainly call you Eve. After the first woman man ever loved. May I ?

EVELYN. If you like,—Cecil.

CECIL. That's settled then. [He kisses her again. Pause of utter happiness, during which he settles her head more comfortably on his shoulder, and puts his arm round her.] Isn't it heavenly to be in love ?

EVELYN. Heavenly !

CECIL. There's nothing like it in the whole world.

The Constant Lover

'Love is the most beautiful thing in the whole world !
Say so.

EVELYN. Love is the most beautiful thing in the whole world.

CECIL. Good girl ! There's a reward for saying it right.
[Kisses her.]

[*Pause of complete happiness for both.*]

EVELYN [*meditatively*]. I'm afraid Reggie won't be pleased.

[*The chatter of sparrows is heard.*]

CECIL [*indifferently*]. Won't he ?

EVELYN [*shakes her head*]. No. You see, Reggie's in love with me too. He always has been in love with me, for years and years. [Sighs.] Poor Reggie !

CECIL. On the contrary. Happy Reggie !

EVELYN [*astonished*]. What do you mean ?

CECIL. To have been in love with you years and years. I've only been in love with you a week. . . . I've only known you a week.

EVELYN. I'm afraid Reggie didn't look at it like that.

CECIL [*nods*]. No brains.

EVELYN. You see, I always refused him.

CECIL. Exactly. And he always went on loving you. What more could the silly fellow want ?

EVELYN [*shyly, looking up at him*]. He wanted me to accept him, I suppose.

[*The bird chatter dies away.*]

CECIL. Ah ! . . . Reggie ought to read Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn." . . . I say, what jolly

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eyes you've got ! I noticed them the moment we met here in the wood. That was why I spoke to you.

EVELYN [*demurely*]. I thought it was to ask your way back to the inn.

CECIL. That was an excuse. I knew the way as well as you did. I'd only just come from there. But when I saw you with the sunshine on your pretty soft hair and lighting up your pretty soft eyes, I said I *must* speak to her. And I did. Are you glad I spoke to you ?

EVELYN. Yes.

CECIL. Glad and glad ?

EVELYN. Yes.

CECIL. Good girl ! [*Leans over and kisses her cheek*.

EVELYN [*sigh of contentment ; sits up*]. And now we must go and tell mother.

CECIL [*with a comic groan*]. Need we ?

EVELYN [*brightly*]. Of course.

CECIL [*sigh*]. Well, if *you* think so.

EVELYN [*laughing*]. You don't seem to look forward to it much.

CECIL. I don't. That's the part I always hate.

EVELYN. *Always* ?

[*Starts forward and looks at him, puzzled*.]

CECIL [*quite unconscious*]. Yes. The going to the parents and all that. Parents really are the most preposterous people. They've no feeling for *romance* whatever. You meet a girl in a wood. It's May. The sun's shining. There's not a cloud in the sky. She's adorably pretty. You fall in love. Everything heavenly ! Then—why, I can't imagine—she wants you to tell her mother. Well, you do tell her mother.

The Constant Lover

And her mother at once begins to ask you what your profession is, and how much money you earn, and how much money you have that you don't earn—and that spoils it all.

EVELYN [*bewildered*]. But I don't understand. You talk as if you had actually done all this before.

CECIL. So I have. Lots of times.

EVELYN. Oh !

[*Jumps up from the ground and faces him, her eyes flashing with rage.*]

CECIL. I say, don't get up. It's not time to go yet. It's only four. Sit down again.

EVELYN [*struggling for words*]. Do you mean to say you've been in love with girls before ? Other girls ?

CECIL [*apparently genuinely astonished at the question*]. Of course I have.

EVELYN. And been engaged to them ?

CECIL. Not engaged. I've never been engaged so far. But I've been in love over and over again.

[*EVELYN stamps her foot with rage—turning away from him.*]

My dear girl, what *is* the matter ? You look quite cross.

[*Rises.*

EVELYN [*furious*]. And you're not even *ashamed* of it ?

CECIL [*roused to sit up by this question*]. Ashamed of it ? Ashamed of being in love ? How can you say such a thing ! Of course I'm not ashamed. What's the good of being alive at all if one isn't to be in love ? I'm perpetually in love. In fact, I'm hardly ever out of love—with somebody.

The Constant Lover

EVELYN [*still furious*]. Then if you're in love, why don't you get engaged? A man has no business to make love to a girl and not be engaged to her. It's not right.

CECIL [*reasoning with her*]. That's the parents' fault. I told you parents were preposterous people. They won't allow me to get engaged.

EVELYN. Why not?

CECIL. Oh, for different reasons. They say I'm not *serious* enough. Or that I don't work enough. Or that I haven't got enough money. Or else they simply say they "don't think I'm fitted to make their daughter happy." Anyhow, they won't sanction an engagement. They all agree about *that*. Your mother would be just the same.

[*Impatient exclamation from EVELYN.*]

I don't blame her. I don't say she's not right. I don't say they haven't all been right. In fact, I believe they *have* been right. I'm only explaining how it is.

EVELYN [*savagely*]. I see how it is. You don't really want to be married.

CECIL. Of course I don't *want* to be married. Nobody does unless he's perfectly idiotic. One wants to be in love. Being in love's splendid. And I dare say being engaged isn't bad—though I've had no experience of that so far. But being married must be simply hateful.

EVELYN [*boiling with rage*]. Nonsense! How can it be hateful to be married if it's splendid to be in love?

[*The cuckoo is heard.*]

The Constant Lover

CECIL. Have you forgotten the cuckoo ?

EVELYN. Oh !!!

CECIL. No ties, no responsibilities, no ghastly little villa with children bellowing in the nursery. Just life in the open hedgerow. Life and love. Happy cuckoo !

EVELYN [*furious*]. I think cuckoos detestable. They're mean, horrid, *disgusting* birds.

CECIL. No. No. I can't have you abusing cuckoos. They're particular friends of mine. In fact, I'm a sort of cuckoo myself.

EVELYN [*turning on him*]. Oh, I hate you ! I hate you ! [Stamps her foot.]

CECIL [*with quiet conviction*]. You don't.

EVELYN. I do !

CECIL [*shaking his head*]. You don't. [*Quite gravely.*] One never really hates the people one has once loved.

[*He looks into her eyes. For a moment or two she returns his gaze fiercely. Then her eyes fall and they fill with tears.*]

EVELYN [*half crying*]. How horrid you are to say that !

CECIL. Why ?

EVELYN. Because it's true, I suppose. Oh, I'm so unhappy ! [Begins to cry.]

CECIL [*genuinely distressed*]. Eve ! You're crying. You mustn't do that. I can't bear seeing people cry. [Lays hand on her shoulder.]

EVELYN [*shaking it off*]. Don't. I can't bear you to touch me. After falling in love with one girl after another like that. When I thought you were only in love with me.

The Constant Lover

CECIL. So I am only in love with you—now.

EVELYN [*tearfully*]. But I thought you'd never been in love with any one else. And I let you call me Eve because you said she was the first woman man ever loved.

CECIL. But I never said she was the only one, did I ? [*Argumentatively*.] And one can't *help* being in love with people when one *is* in love, can one ? I couldn't *help* falling in love with you, for instance, the moment I saw you. You looked simply splendid. It was such a splendid day too. *Of course* I fell in love with you.

EVELYN [*slightly appeased by this compliment, drying her eyes*]. But you seem to fall in love with such a lot of people.

CECIL. I do. [*Mischievously*.] But ought *you* to throw stones at me ? After all, being in love with more than one person is no worse than having more than one person in love with you. How about Reggie ?

EVELYN. Reggie ?

[*The sparrows' chatter starts again.*]

CECIL [*nods*]. Reggie's in love with you, isn't he ? So am I. And both at once too ! I'm only in love with one person at a time.

EVELYN [*rebelliously*]. I can't help Reggie being in love with me.

CECIL. And I can't help *my* being in love with you. That's just my point. I knew you'd see it.

EVELYN. I don't see it at all. Reggie is quite different from you. Reggie's love is true and constant . . .

The Constant Lover

CECIL. Well, I'm a *constant* lover if you come to that.

EVELYN. You aren't. You know you aren't.

CECIL. Yes, I am. A constant lover is a lover who is constantly in love.

EVELYN. Only with the same person.

CECIL. It doesn't say so. It only says constant.

EVELYN [*half-laughing*]. How ridiculous you are!

[*Turns away*.]

CECIL [*sigh of relief*]. That's right. Now you're good-tempered again.

EVELYN. I'm not.

CECIL. What a story!

EVELYN. I'm not. I'm very, *very* angry.

CECIL. That's impossible. You can't possibly be angry and laugh at the same time, can you? No one can. And you *did* laugh. You're doing it now.

[*She does so unwillingly.*]

So don't let's quarrel any more. It's absurd to quarrel on such a fine day, isn't it? Let's make it up, and be lovers again.

[*The sparrows die away.*]

EVELYN [*shaking her head*]. No.

CECIL. Please!

EVELYN [*shaking her head*]. No.

CECIL. Well, you're very foolish. Love isn't a thing to throw away. It's too precious for that. Love is the most beautiful thing in the whole world. You said so yourself not ten minutes ago.

EVELYN. I didn't. You said it. [*Looking down*.]

The Constant Lover

CECIL. But you said it after me. [*Gently and gravely.*] Eve, dear, don't be silly. Let's be in love while we can. Youth is the time to be in love, isn't it? Soon you and I will be dull and stupid and middle-aged like all the other tedious people. And then it will be too late. Youth passes so quickly. Don't let's waste a second of it. They say the May-fly only lives for one day. He is born in the morning. All the afternoon he flutters over the river in the sunshine, dodging the trout and flirting with other May-flies. And at evening he dies. Think of the poor May-fly who happens to be born on a wet day! The tragedy of it!

EVELYN [*softly*]. Poor May-fly.

CECIL. There! You're sorry for the May-fly, you see. You're only angry with me.

EVELYN. Because you're not a May-fly.

CECIL. Yes, I am. A sort of May-fly.

EVELYN [*with suspicion of tears in her voice*]. You aren't. How can you be? Besides, you said you were a cuckoo just now.

CECIL. I suppose I'm a cuckoo-May-fly. For I hate wet days. And if you're going to cry again, it might just as well be wet, mightn't it? So do dry your eyes like a good girl. Let me do it for you. [*Does it with her handkerchief.*]

[*She laughs ruefully.*]

There, that's better. And now we're going to be good children again, aren't we?

EVELYN [*giving in*]. Yes.

CECIL [*holding out his hand*]. And you'll kiss me and be friends?

The Constant Lover

EVELYN. I'll be friends, of course. [Sadly.] But you must never kiss me again.

CECIL. What a shame ! Why not ?

EVELYN. Because you mustn't.

CECIL [cheerfully]. Well, you'll sit down again anyhow, won't you ? just to show we've made it up. [Moves towards tree.]

EVELYN [shakes head]. No.

CECIL [disappointed ; turns]. Ah ! . . . Then you haven't really made it up.

EVELYN. Yes, I have. [Picks up her hat.] But I must go now. Reggie's coming down by the five o'clock train, and I want to be at the station to meet him. [Holds out her hand.] Good-bye, Mr. Harburton.

CECIL [taking her hand]. Eve ! You're going to accept Reggie ! [Pause.]

EVELYN [half to herself]. I wonder.

CECIL. And he'll have to tell your mother ?

EVELYN. Of course.

CECIL [drops her hand]. Poor Reggie ! So his romance ends too !

EVELYN. It won't. If I marry Reggie I shall make him very happy.

CECIL. Very likely. Marriage may be happiness, but I'm hanged if it's romance !

EVELYN. Oh !

[Exclamation of impatience. She turns away and exits. CECIL watches her departure with a smile, half-amused, half-pained, till she is long out of sight. Then with half a sigh he turns back to his tree.]

CECIL [reseating himself]. Poor Reggie !

[Reopens his book and settles himself to read again.

The Constant Lover

A cuckoo hoots loudly from a distant thicket and is answered by another. CECIL looks up from his book to listen as the curtain falls.]

CURTAIN

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